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IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

MAY 1952

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**TONIGHT
THE SKY
WILL FALL!**

by

**DANIEL F.
GALOUYE**

MAY 1952

IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

VOL. 3 NO. 3
ISSUE NO. 10

Introducing the

AUTHOR



Daniel F. Galouye



FTER writing "thirty" to news story Number Thirteen or Fourteen Thousand, the average (or should we say restless?) newspaperman is abruptly seized with a disillusioning realization: News isn't really news! Conceding that accounts of public occurrences differ over any short period of time, I hasten to point out it becomes quite apparent after a few years' typewriter-tickling that all stories fall in categories and that after Category Eleven-C has been written for the umpteenth time it is stripped of all its novel aspects. News writing then becomes a matter of selecting appropriate forms from an imaginary file and filling in names, addresses, dates and times to suit the particular occasion.

What does acquisition of such a

conviction do to the restless newsman? Many of them look back on the recently written story and imagine the element that could have been added, or the situation that could have been strengthened to justify the seldom-proved adage, "Truth is stranger than fiction."

At any rate, the prospective tedium was what, in my case, stimulated speculative thinking. A news story became the beginning of a plot. The reform candidate became a protagonist; the lecturer, a villain; the Texas City explosion, not an explosion at all but an attack from space; hurricanes whipping inland from the Gulf—malevolent, intelligent entities whom we could not recognize as such because of inadequate perception.

(Concluded on Page 61)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MAY
1952

VOLUME 3
NUMBER 3

IMAGINATION
STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

Stories

TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL!

(Novel—25,000 words) by Daniel F. Galouye 6
If Tarl "awoke", the Universe ended. An incredible fact—impossible to prevent! . . .

HIDEOUT

(Short—5,000 words) by Fox B. Holden 62
He was cornered, with only two doors of escape left open to him: Death—or Time!

FINAL EXAMINATION

(Short—7,500 words) by Robert Sheckley 76
Judgment day is probably a long way off. But suppose it was tomorrow. Suppose . . .

THE DARK CAME OUT TO PLAY . . .

(Short—3,800 words) by Zenna Henderson 94
The Dark was a figment of Stevie's imagination. Yet to a child all things are real!

THE STRANGER

(Short—3,400 words) by Gordon R. Dickson 104
They found an alien space craft on another world. Should they investigate—or run?

SURVIVORS

(Short-Short—800 words) by Arthur Dekker Savage 114
After the final atom war our civilization will end. The question: What comes next?

DESTINY UNCERTAIN

(Novelette—10,000 words) by Rog Phillips 116
Lin knew he was living on borrowed time—so why not steal a page from history! . . .

Features

INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR	2	FORECAST	141
THE EDITORIAL	4	FANDORA'S BOX	142
LAMPSHADE FOR A-BOMBS	75	LETTERS FROM THE READERS	149
GAS FROM COAL!	93	SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT	162

MALCOLM SMITH, Art Editor

Front cover photo-dyed print by Malcolm Smith, suggested by "Tonight the Sky Will Fall!" Original photograph of Michigan Boulevard, Chicago, for cover, from Acme. Interior illustrations by Malcolm Smith, H. W. McCauley, and W. E. Terry.

Published bi-monthly by Greenleaf Publishing Company, 1426 Fowler Avenue, Evanston, Illinois. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Evanston, Illinois. Additional entry at Sandusky, Ohio. Editorial Office: Post Office Box 230, Evanston, Illinois. Address all manuscripts, subscriptions and correspondence to Editorial Office. We do not accept responsibility for the return of unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. To facilitate handling the author should enclose self-addressed, stamped envelope. The names of all characters that are used in stories are fictitious. Subscription rates: 12 issues \$3.00 in U.S.A. All other countries \$3.50. Copyright 1952, Greenleaf Publishing Co.

The Editorial

PAGE 162 is the most important page in this issue! It's important because you'll find an announcement there that we believe is unique in science fiction history. It concerns you — and IMAGINATION. As we go to press, Madge is in the middle of a big subscription drive. We want to expand our mailing lists, and to do it we've come up with an idea that will not only accomplish our goal but give you the next twelve issues absolutely free. The announcement is self-explanatory so we won't bother with further details here except to say that it's the biggest science fiction offer we've ever heard of. Darned if we're not going to take advantage of it ourselves!

THERE'S some other big news this issue too. The photo-cover for one thing. In case you're interested on how Malcolm Smith accomplished the job, here are the details. The cover consists of two photographs. One of a beautiful model, the other a shot of famed Michigan boulevard in Chicago. Malcolm took the street shot and made a copy negative of it, (that is, he photographed the photo, thus getting a new negative of the same picture) and immersed the negative in hot water. Adding baking soda loosened the emulsion on the negative. Smith then withdrew the negative from the water and "ran" the negative by dexterously tracing his fingertips through the loosened emulsion. After he had achieved the pattern of brok-

en buildings he wanted (he had to use good judgment because he had no way of actually knowing how successful he was being) he let the negative dry and the emulsion hardened into the pattern you see on the cover.

THE next step was to combine both negatives (the model and the street shot) and make a single finished print. This took a little experimentation too so that he could get just the right placement for the gal on the cover. Finally he got what he wanted and set about the finishing task of dyeing the print in full color. The result you've already seen; we hope you were as impressed with it as we were when we first saw it. For this type of work an artist has to have photographic skill, and we think Malcolm proved his mastery over the intricacies of dark-room technique.

NEXT month's cover is somewhat unusual too. It's a Harold McCauley painting illustrating the new "Toffee" novel by Charles F. Myers. (We'll talk a little more about that later.) The interesting thing about the cover is the fact that Mac used his wife to model for "Toffee"—and your editor for Marc Pillsworth! We submit, somewhat plaintively that any resemblance between the "split head" on the cover and us is purely intentional! But seriously, we took quite an interest in this latest McCauley cover since, you might say, we had to put a "head" on it. We

hope you like it!

ON the story side, this issue has big news too. The cover story is by talented newcomer, Daniel F. Galouye. You will remember that Galouye was introduced to Madge last issue with his fine novelette, REBIRTH. We're happy to know, via your letters, that his debut was a very successful one—catching first honors for the issue! We have a hunch that "catching first honors" is going to be a regular routine for Galouye from here on. Certainly his fine novel in this issue is indicative of his capabilities as a writer. We feel that Dan has plenty on the ball and that he'll rise rapidly to the top. Along those lines Madge will keep you well supplied with his stories. (We've got a number of them scheduled right now for future issues.)

NOW to get back to the TOFFEE novel we mentioned earlier. Next issue marks the return of the hilarious adventures of Marc Pills-worth and his mad-cap dream-girl, "Toffee". If you're unfamiliar with Myers' work, we can best introduce him by saying what so many science-fantasy readers said when we introduced the now famous series in FA a few years ago. The general consensus of opinion was—and is—that Charles Myers has inherited the mantle of the late master of fantasy humor, Thorne Smith. Myers' style of writing is distinct in that it parallels that of the great master. We don't say that Myers is better than Thorne Smith, for indeed, that would be neither fair nor true. We do feel that no other writer has approached in quality and imagination the genius for humor that Thorne Smith so expertly employed. For us, it's always an event of literary importance when a new "Toffee" story is

published. If you are an old "Toffee" fan you'll know what we mean. If this is your first experience with Myers' work, we hope you'll be in for a real treat. Just as Beethoven "milked" every theme for the last possible combination of melodies, so does Myers extract the last bit of humor from every given situation. If you like to laugh—and God knows we need a little more of the same in this world today — you'll enjoy NO TIME FOR TOFFEE. (The big July issue will go on sale promptly the first week in May.)

WOULD you like to see IMAGINATION in hard covers? Well you can! Page 113 carries an announcement from Farrar, Straus and Young, prominent book publishers, on a new science fiction anthology, bearing Madge's title, which we gave the book's editors permission to use. You'll also find material from Madge in the collection of "best" stories. We'd suggest you use the coupon accompanying the announcement and get your copy . . . Also, don't forget page 162! See you next issue wlh



CHAPTER I

“I’m being followed,” Tarl Brent said suddenly as he guided the girl safely to the curb. “I’m certain, Maud,” he insisted. “I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t know for sure.”

The girl frowned until a honking horn quieted, then she drew closer to his side on the crowded sidewalk.

“Fiddlesticks!” she said, pursing her lips. “*You* being followed! That’s ridiculous!”

But he quickened their pace through the noonday crowd and glanced to the left, focusing his eyes on a mirrored store column that permitted a reflected view of the area to his rear.

“Why should anyone want to follow you?” Maud glanced around uncertainly.

“I’d bet the week’s payroll,” he replied, ignoring the question and continuing to stare into the mirror, “that it’s that man in the brown hat and pinstripe suit . . . Wait!” he tightened his grip on the girl’s arm. “Don’t turn around now!”

They had passed the front of the store and the advantage of the reflecting surface was no longer his. “We’ll find out in a minute,” he said.

The girl laughed chidingly, “I’d still be interested in knowing why you believe someone is trailing you.”

“You’ve been my secretary long

enough,” he reminded her, “to know something about me. My being shadowed is just another one of the personal mysteries I’ve got to solve.”

“Mysteries?” Maud cocked an eyebrow.

“That’s right—mysteries. All the ‘whys’ I’ve got to find answers for . . . You know yourself, Maud, that only three years ago I was nothing. And look where I am now—close to my first million.”

“But—there’s no mystery about that. You got your start in business after you inherited a hundred thousand dollars from . . .”

“From a relative I never knew,” he completed the sentence. “I still seriously doubt that any such person existed.”

They waited at the next traffic intersection until the light changed. He looked over his shoulder again. Then they crossed the street.

“And you can’t say I achieved success because of a preponderance of brains,” he offered. “You know as well as I how much luck had to do with everything. . . . I would have dropped over fifty thousand on the market just last week if our brokers hadn’t made an error in jotting down instructions.”

“Nice error,” the girl laughed. “Brought you a profit of thirty thousand, didn’t it? Why worry about anything like that, though. I wouldn’t give it a thought, as long as the luck doesn’t start getting *bad*.”

TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL IN DANCE GALOUV!



Tarl Brent thought he was being followed—but actually, he was being protected; it seemed that the fate of the Universe was in his hands!

SIDESTEPPING an elderly woman, Tarl steered his secretary diagonally across the sidewalk toward the table-studded and unbrellaed patio of a restaurant.

"But, Maud," he protested, "every darn thing that's happened to me in the past three years *has* been luck. It's . . ."

He released the girl's arm, giving her a gentle shove in the direction of the entrance to the Patio. "Go in," he whispered, "and grab a table."

"Tarl!" Maud exclaimed. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to collar that guy who's been following us and find out what this is all about!" He turned abruptly and left.

"Wait!" she shouted, but he disappeared in a group of shoppers.

He strode only a short distance and spotted the man again. An expression of surprise spread over the latter's face. Tarl almost had his hand on the man's shoulder when a spectacled, elderly man, carrying several packages, emerged from a doorway. Tarl and the older man collided and crashed to the sidewalk. The third man wheeled hastily and dashed around the corner.

Leaping to his feet, Tarl felt the spectacled man on the sidewalk grasp his trouser cuff.

"You might at least help me up after knocking me down, young fellow!" the elder gentleman said angrily, maintaining a surprisingly

strong grip on Tarl's trousers.

Tarl looked down at the man, cast a futile glance in the direction of the corner and sighed. "It's too late now."

"What's that you said?"

"Oh, never mind, grandpa," Tarl helped the other to his feet.

Maud was still disturbed when he returned to the patio. "What happened?" she asked.

"He got away," he sat down beside her. "I'm sure of it, Maud. That man *was* following me."

The girl laughed and picked up a newspaper a former diner had left on a chair. "Here's something more interesting to talk about. It says here that: 'Physicists Establish New Speed of Light' . . ."

"Why do you suppose someone is so vitally interested in what I'm doing?" Tarl pinched his chin and stared into space.

"At least three renowned United States physicists," she continued reading from the paper, "today confirmed Dr. Randel Steffington's new estimate of the speed of light, which the Washington scientist established in his laboratory yesterday."

"The three scientists, at the conclusion of separate experiments, agreed light travels at one hundred and two thousand, three hundred and one and one-tenth miles per second, some eighty-four thousand miles a second slower than was previously supposed . . ."

He laughed suddenly. "Okay,

you win."

A waiter appeared and took their orders. Minutes passed as he sat in silence, his secretary studying the lines in his face.

"Look, Tarl," she said finally, "If you're going to brood, I won't try to keep you from discussing the matter . . . Let's have it."

HIS eyes grew thoughtful. "I'm not just imagining there's something mysterious going on," he crossed his arms and leaned on the table. "I began to suspect it when I was traveling to New York after I'd been informed of the inheritance. I had no money and was hopping rails on the way over . . . Almost didn't get here. There was that little whistlestop incident, where the train pulled on a siding and I got in an argument with a couple of drunks in the rail yard.

"It wouldn't have taken them a minute to take care of me with those broken beer bottles. They were closing in, swinging, when three other bums appeared from around a boxcar. I didn't have to strike a blow. Those three laid the others out cold. But I didn't get a chance to thank them; they disappeared too fast.

"Ever since then, things have happened that way . . . Always somebody appearing from nowhere to hold on to my arm when it looked like I might step into a stream of traffic . . . If I go out on the yacht and the water gets a little choppy, boats spring up from nowhere . . .

"But all the unrelated incidents didn't make sense until I started putting them together a few weeks ago. Now I see they all fit into a pattern—of someone or some group trying their best to protect me in every conceivable way. Physically, economically, any way you can think of . . .

"Know what made me realize that, Maud?" he asked suddenly. The girl shook her head.

"You remember it. The papers carried it last month." *

"Oh, you mean the holdup?"

"That's right . . . It was in front of my home. My chauffeur and I got out of the car at the same time. This guy appeared from behind the hedge and pulled a revolver. Before he got through saying 'This is a stickup,' guns started firing all around the place . . .

"Police counted twenty-six slugs in his body. Who fired those shots? —Why, if for no other reason than to protect me? Why couldn't the men be found?"

Tarl's chair jarred lightly as it was struck by a chair from the table behind him. The man sitting in the chair had risen abruptly and disappeared into the restaurant proper.

Another man took his place. Maud's eyes met the newcomer's momentarily. Then she returned her attention to Tarl.

IN an unpretentious building half-way across town, an office tele-

phone rang on the fifth floor. A gaunt, middle-aged man with a dispassionate face answered the ring.

"Yes?"

"Headquarters?"

"Yes, this is headquarters . . . Chief Director speaking."

"M-3 reporting."

"You've been properly relieved?"

"Of course . . . But, let's sidetrack formalities, T. J. This is serious . . . He is even more suspicious than he was yesterday. Charles, his chauffeur, and his secretary . . ."

"Never mention any member of the project by name or relationship," T. J. admonished curtly.

"Well, S-14 and B-1 were right when they reported that he showed an increasing tendency to question the work of headquarters' agents as being natural occurrences. I gather he's completely aware of the fact he is under constant surveillance. It seems he tried to run down . . ."

"Yes, we know. T-22 reported five minutes ago. The attempt was unsuccessful, thanks to F-5's quick thinking."

M-3 spoke rapidly, unhesitatingly. A telephone-wire recorder hooked to the line imprinted the agent's words on steel tape for the file. His words constituted an account of Tarl's conversation at the patio table.

T. J. interrupted him only once —when he mentioned the secretary's quoting from the newspaper. "Did he react at the mention of the speed

of light?"

"No. But I think B-1 ought to be cautioned further against use of trigger language—if, as you say, there's a possibility of responsive action."

"She will be reminded," T. J. assured.

"Shall I take my post again?" M-3 inquired.

"Of course not! You know you can have no more than one assignment a month."

"Then I'm through for the day?"

"Through for as long as it takes you to get back here and get your nose in the files for the next thirty days."

T. J. leaned back in his chair. He pressed several buttons on the table. Three men entered the room a moment later. They took chairs around the table.

After staring at each in turn, T. J. announced, "It's getting worse!"

The three looked worried. One of them asked, "What can we do, T. J.?"

"I don't know," the Chief Director toyed with a pencil. "But there'll be a directors' meeting this afternoon." He looked at his watch,—"Within the next hour."

"Chances are," another said, "we've been too vigilant. We're defeating our own purpose, T. J., if we let him find out. His suspicions might bring out just what we had hoped to suppress!"

"You think that announcement yesterday by Steffington might have triggered?" the agent on T. J.'s right asked nervously.

"No," the Chief Director assured. "We had a check on that just a few minutes ago. At least, there was no *apparent* conscious-response to the 'light speed' stimulus . . . As a matter of fact, there wasn't any conscious reaction to any of the scientific announcements during the past three years. It's a good thing his mind—his conscious, rather—isn't inclined toward any of the sciences."

The third man at the table mopped his brow erratically with a handkerchief.

"It'd be all over," he said, "if he ever found out he's responsible for all those startling iconoclastic discoveries . . ."

T. J. cut him short. "Don't forget—he's responsible for all but the first, even though he doesn't know it. *We* are responsible for the initial one—indirectly. Of course, he caused it, but it was our prompting that was indirectly to blame."

The fourth man, who hadn't spoken until then, said hesitatingly, "I wonder whether everything would have been all right if we just hadn't tried to verify the supposition—if we'd just taken it for granted that what we suspected was true and hadn't tried to experiment by triggering the initial response?"

T. J. held up a hand protesting-

ly, "Well, that's all in the past now. Too late to do anything. It's true—it was our test that resulted in the 'unexplained' disappearance of the planet Mercury. We know the planet didn't fall into the Sun while at apogee. We know it was just dematerialized . . . But, we learned beyond a doubt what was lurking in the back of Brent's subconscious."

THE agent opposite T. J. began perspiring again. "If only we had left him alone! If only we hadn't doped him and allowed Mendel to . . ."

"Dr. Mendel," T. J. interrupted, "is the best psychiatrist in the world. The test stimulus was administered perfectly. Brent was in one of the most complete somnambulistic states I've ever seen a man. The suggestion reached his subconscious—beyond his subconscious," T. J. shuddered, "and elicited the proving response. Post-hypnotic suggestions worked smoothly, judging from all reports we received. Brent never even remembered the incidents leading to his doping. I don't think anyone else besides Mendel . . ."

"Am I being discussed?" a bass voice sounded from the direction of an open door. A tall, sharp featured man stood there.

"Ah! Dr. Mendel," T. J. rose, crossed to the door and accompanied the doctor to a chair at the table.

"We're calling a directors' meeting," T. J. said after Mendel had

made himself comfortable.

"Then you think the situation is that serious?"

"Brent is becoming increasingly suspicious," T. J. drummed his fingers on the table top. "We were just discussing the possibility of something having gone wrong."

"I was saying," the man on the director's right spoke, "that something *must* have been miscalculated . . . Unprovoked responses have cropped up almost periodically since we started this project—expressly to prevent such responses! True, we had hoped there would be only the initial response. But others followed. And now, they're getting closer together . . . I tell you, that *thing* is stirring! What about the disappearance of the common cold a year ago?"

"Why, that was . . ." T. J. broke in.

"And there's the matter of the newly established distance of the Earth from the Sun," the agent ignored the interruption. "And the unanticipated discovery of three elements that defy assignment to the periodic table. The disproof of Avogardo's Hypothesis . . . That's too many milestones at once. I tell you the *thing* is stirring!"

"If it's stirring to the extent that it can't be stopped and lulled back into inactivity, then there isn't very much we can do, is there?" T. J. patted his hand lightly on the table.

The other three men twisted their

heads slowly, staring at one another.

Dr. Mendel rose, walked to the window and stared pensively into the busy street below.

"Gentlemen," he said, "have you ever relaxed at this project long enough to consider the tremendous, unlimited power we are toying with? If it could only be harnessed . . . Imagine having all the energy that ever existed in the universe at your disposal!"

The doctor turned slowly and faced the men at the desk. His eyes, however, were not focused on anything in the room. His voice was muted: "If there were only some way that power could be controlled—turned free under control for utilization . . . Why, nothing would be impossible—*Nothing!*" he raised his voice alarmingly.

T. J. cleared his throat. "I would shudder even to think along those lines," he said reprovingly. "The fate of humanity depends on our being able to imprison that power so it can be applied in no other way than a natural one."

"But, T. J.," Dr. Mendel turned to the Director, "the power is already being released. A planet's gone. An entire universe of micro-organisms responsible for a disease has been snuffed out. Another manifestation occurs, and we find that astronomers have been all wet for the past two hundred years—that the Earth is actually closer to the

Sun; that the Sun's heat isn't as intense as we thought it was . . . I am convinced there'll be other manifestations. Perhaps we should abandon our present course. Maybe we should arouse *it* to consciousness and attempt communication . . ."

"No, Mendel," T. J. shook his head dourly. "That is our last recourse . . . Anyway, I believe there is still hope for our original plan of action. We must allay Brent's suspicions. Have our agents relax their vigilance a bit. And, I have another plan . . ."

The four men stared at him, waiting.

" . . . We've overlooked one main factor until now . . . We have made no concerted effort to introduce affection into his environment. Brent is still sentimentally unattached."

"But," Mendel frowned. "I thought Maud, I mean B-1 . . ."

"No, there's nothing there," T. J. shook his head. "If anything had developed between them it would have been accidental—not planned. I believe that if we find a personality that appeals to him and a physical type that will attract him, then his conscious and subconscious will become preoccupied again—perhaps lulling into complete lethargy the *thing* . . ."

T. J. rose from his swivel chair. The three visiting directors accepted the move as signifying the conference's end and left the room. T. J. turned to Mendel.

"At any rate, we'll thrash it all out within the next two hours. In the meantime, we'll put as many workers as we can spare on the files, digging out anything that might throw light on his preferences in women."

CHAPTER II

A jostling crowd hurried along the sidewalk in the descending darkness. Tarl, his topcoat thrown over an arm, stood impatiently behind the glass doors of his office building's lobby, waiting for his chauffeur.

A flash of chrome and black metal rolled into place in front of the building. Charles' angular, stout and friendly face framed itself in the window on the right of the automobile. He reached over the seat and released the latch on the rear door.

Tarl, pulling his hat brim lower and striding out the building, collided with a girl who had been walking at a brisk pace. The force of the blow drew a sharp cry from her lips and she clutched at Tarl's overcoat as she sprawled on the sidewalk. He managed to keep his balance.

Her small, inverted ice-cream cone-shaped hat was knocked to one side and dangled precariously over her brow, concealing one eye. Tufts of lustrous red hair fell to the shoulders of her trim suit and blend-

ed with the peach complexion of her cheeks.

The girl's full skirt had been swept upward as she fell. Its hem lay neatly across her legs, midway between knees and hips, revealing firm, shapely calves and thighs. She sat there a moment, surprised—a startled expression on her attractive face.

"Whew!" she exclaimed, arranging her hat as Tarl helped her to her feet. "That was some blow!"

"I'm awfully sorry," he said earnestly. "I don't . . ."

"Oh, don't apologize," she smiled. "It was probably all my fault."

Traces of a frown appeared on his forehead, as he suddenly considered mentally the coincidental aspect of this and the other accident earlier in the day.

The girl seemed to be studying his face, as though looking for something. After a few seconds' silence, she looked away with embarrassment. The alarm bell rang in Tarl's mind.

He took his hands from her arms and she stepped toward the doorway to escape the surrounding crowd. The girl faltered and almost fell. He caught her arm a second time.

"I—I," the girl reached down and placed a hand around her ankle. "I think I might have twisted it." A moment's silence. "I don't know if I can make it home . . ."

Again the cloud of misgiving floated into his mind. This girl seem-

ed to be anxious to further the accidental relationship.

"I could send you home in a cab," he suggested, breaking the silence.

The girl glanced momentarily at the automobile parked at the curb. Tarl's eyebrows tensed as he interpreted her glance to betray the fact that she knew, without being so informed, he had a car and chauffeur waiting.

"Let's go," he said, taking her elbow and acting on an impulse, "we'll get a cab and see that you get home all right."

"My name's Leila Smithers," she frowned as she limped across the sidewalk with him "What's yours?"

"Tarl," he said, hailing a cab. "Tarl Brent."

"I live at 8642 Chestnut," she threw over her shoulder as she climbed into the vehicle.

In timed movements, Tarl thrust a bill into the hand of the driver, slammed the door behind the girl and told the cabbie, "You heard the address, get going!"

The vehicle moved off in the stream of traffic.

EVEN as the cab vanished he regretted his action. If the feeling he had was correct, he should have held on to her, played the game to learn all he wanted to know.

As he climbed into the front seat of his own car, he could detect signs of a headache. He hoped it wouldn't be too bad this time—wouldn't last

as long as previous ones had . . .

"That was some beauty, boss," Charles observed as he pointed the car into the traffic. "Boy, I sure wish I could bump into something like that."

"Should've told me sooner, Charlie, I'd have held on to her for you." He managed a smile despite the throbbing sensation at the base of his skull.

"Yeah," Charles shook his head again and whistled. "She was some beauty!"

"So were the other two," Tarl said musingly.

"What other two?"

"Well, Charlie, I'll tell you all about it," he sighed, relaxing. "Miss redhead wasn't the only one I 'bumped' into today. She was just one of three gorgeous girls. One of the others was a blonde; one was a brunette. All meetings were accidental. All the girls were eager to become acquainted."

He turned to his chauffeur. "What do you make of that?"

"If it's like you said, I'd say you could fall in and come out smelling like a rose."

Tarl laughed. "You don't get the point . . . Three women. The three most beautiful I've ever seen. Meeting all of them, not in the same year, or the same month—but in the space of just one day. Doesn't that seem unusual to you?"

"Aw, boss," Charles remonstrated, "you're not gonna start kicking

about your luck again, are you?"

"Well, Charlie, you can't say . . ."

"For cripes sakes, boss! Why don't you just relax and enjoy it. If you got three beautiful women who wanna make friends with you, why don't you let 'em?—Hell, I wouldn't have any objections to that!"

"I wouldn't either, Charlie, if I knew why . . . why there should be so many of them at one time."

Tarl was silent a while. Charles broke the silence. "Ever have a girl, boss?"

"Of course I've had a girl. Just because I don't seem to be too interested in them now doesn't mean I wasn't at one time."

"Oh, ho!" Charles' head twisted in his employer's direction. "So that's it. Tell me, boss, what was she like? What happened?"

"Well—she was nice. Not beautiful. Not plain, either . . . Attractive."

He fell silent again. But Charles didn't interrupt his thoughts.

"Guess I would have married her," Tarl resumed, "but she saw what was coming. She saw my growing affinity for alcohol. And she decided she didn't care to have anything more to do with me. Maybe she was selfish about it. Maybe she thought she could jolt me out of the rut I was getting in . . . But it didn't work. I kept on drinking. Before I knew it, she had left town. Came here. Right now she's prob-

ably somewhere in this city."

"What was her name?"

"Marcella—Marcella Boyland."

"Lived close to you?"

"In the rooming house across the street."

"I'd like to see this gal. You say . . ."

"I have a picture of her," Tarl took out his wallet, fished in it several seconds and withdrew a small photograph. He handed it to Charles and replaced the wallet. The chauffeur snapped on the ceiling light and divided his attention between driving and the snapshot.

"Say!" Charles exclaimed. "She ain't bad at all! Of course, nothing like the redhead . . . But she's all right!"

Charles handed the picture back to him and he placed it in his side coat pocket.

THE brakes were applied suddenly and Tarl was jolted forward. A late-model sedan had stopped abruptly at the intersection ahead when the driver had a green light. The chauffeur hadn't been able to brake the car fast enough and their heavier automobile nudged the rear of the other car.

Tarl knew that not much damage could have been done. But the curb-side door of the front car was opening.

It wasn't an irate man, however, who got out of the car. He knew, when he saw the nicely shaped ankle

and calf stretch out beneath the opened door to the street, that it was another young woman.

"Wasn't my fault," Charles turned to his employer. "It was his."

"Not *his*, Charlie," Tarl corrected. "Not his . . . It's a woman. Another Venus. See for yourself."

The two men stepped to the street. The woman, who was not more than twenty-one, stormed up and placed her hands on her hips, fire flashing from her eyes.

"I suppose you have an excuse," she fumed, glancing first at Charles then fastening her stare on Tarl.

"Excuse, lady!" It was Charles who exploded. "You shouldn't have stopped like you did."

The girl gasped. "You saw me put my hand out!" She stomped her small foot on the asphalt roadway.

"If there are any damages," Tarl stepped between the pair, I'll see that a settlement is made—by noon tomorrow, at the latest."

The girl appeared to be pacified somewhat, but her breasts continued to rise and fall rapidly under the tight-fitting sweater. The vivacious, peppery type, Tarl guessed. It was more than suspicion that told him she was putting on an act. He was dead certain of it!

"Where do you live?" he smiled, trying to play it the way he thought she would want him to.

"You're not going to send a lawyer to deal with me?" Fire lit up her eyes again.

"I intend to see that your car is taken care of immediately," he smiled. "And, if you have no objections, I'll take you home."

The girl's face relaxed. He reached for her arm. But instead of taking her by the elbow, he grimaced in pain and staggered. Charles grabbed his arm and supported him.

"It's that pain in the head again," Tarl muttered. "Give me a hand back in the car. I'll be all right."

Then he went limp in Charles' arms . . .

THE girl's face screwed into a puzzled mask.

"He's fainted," Charles explained, placing his employer in the car. Onlookers were not close enough to hear the conversation.

"Well, for God's sake, get him to a doctor!" The girl wrung her hands desperately. "Do something!"

"He'll be all right. Headquarters knows about his condition. He's under Mendel's care. You'd better report back and tell them to send Mendel to the residence right away . . . I'm taking him there now."

The girl retreated to her car. Charles leaned into the Limousine and patted Tarl's wrists. His head rolling slowly, Tarl regained consciousness.

"You'll be okay, boss," Charles assured. "I'm taking you home. I've already called Dr. Mendel and told him to meet us there."

TARL'S head ached dullly and throbbed against the pillow. Reflected in the mirror across the bedroom was Dr. Mendel's stoic face. The psychiatrist, his back to Tarl, was filling a syringe and carefully noting the volume of liquid that was being drawn into the chamber of the instrument.

"This is going to put you into a deep sleep for the rest of the night," Mendel turned suddenly to the bed, holding the needle point upright. "I'll stay here tonight and we'll see whether you feel any better in the morning."

The psychiatrist continued talking reassuringly as he thrust the needle into the flesh of Tarl's arm. "Of course, you realize you'll have to have complete rest after this. You should be confined to bed for at least two days—remain away from the office several weeks."

The burning liquid coursed into his bloodstream and its effect was almost immediate. His vision of the room became blurred and his eyelids grew heavy.

But in the waning moments of awareness, he felt his head throbbing furiously. He labored under the sensation that something that was a part of him—yet alien to him—was rumbling inwardly, attempting to snap its shackles and escape.

"Can you still hear me, Brent?" came the voice of Dr. Mendel—thinly, distant. Then consciousness left completely . . .

The psychiatrist sat on the edge of the bed, peering into Tarl's face. With a thumb, he elevated each of the closed eyelids. Satisfied with the appearance of Tarl's eyes, he took off his coat and threw it across a chair. Mendel's features showed an expectant half-smile.

He grasped the sheets and blankets, pulling them roughly to the foot of the bed. Twisting Tarl's body around, he tossed the limp legs over the edge of the mattress. Then he took Tarl by the shoulders and elevated him to a sitting position.

Eyes still closed, Tarl swayed once. Mendel steadied him. Then he remained motionless, seated upright on the edge of the bed.

Brushing hair from his forehead, the psychiatrist knelt before Tarl.

"I am . . ." Mendel said prodigally, grasping Tarl by the arms. The intonation was expectant—coaxing.

"I am . . ." the doctor repeated louder, tightening his grip on the other's forearms.

Tarl's face twitched and his mouth opened and closed. The skin around his eyes grew taut, but the eyelids did not raise. His appearance was trance-like.

"I am . . . Tarl Brent," he said finally.

"But," Mendel moved his face closer, until his almost panting breath was blowing against Tarl's cheek. "But I am more than Tarl Brent. I am . . ."

A shudder ran through Tarl's form and the skin on his face became moist. But he remained silent, his lips now parted.

"I am more than Tarl Brent!" Mendel repeated, his voice raised in volume and pitch as sudden anger flared in his eyes. "I am . . ."

Tarl was silent. Mendel waited, anticipation drawing his teeth together in a tight grip.

Suddenly a violent shiver ran through Tarl's body and he shouted hoarsely. There were more screams, but the eyes remained closed.

Mendel clamped a hand over the quivering lips and shook Tarl's body viciously. "Shut up, you idiot!" Mendel shouted. "Damn you, shut up!"

THE spasmic motion that wracked Tarl's throat disappeared and Mendel released him. But tremors continued to race through his body.

An expression of disgust on his face, Mendel drew his right hand back and struck Tarl across the cheek. The imprint of the knuckles etched in red on the pale skin. But even the violence of the blow did not arouse the man from his deep hypnosis.

The psychiatrist pushed Tarl back harshly on the bed. Clasping his hands behind his back, Mendel walked aimlessly around the room, his lips curled in a sneer.

"It's got to happen! It's got to happen!" he muttered absently. "I can't be wrong . . . There'll be a time when it'll awaken fully!"

His pacing slowed to a restless stroll and he clenched and relaxed his fists rhythmically.

"The power!" he whispered. "The immense power! If I can only bring about the awakening at the right time! Transferring it from him to me shouldn't be too hard. But Brent will have to be killed at the right moment . . . The stakes are high—it's everything for me, or the end of everything, and everybody, even myself!"

Mendel stood suddenly at the side of the bed.

"I am Tarl Brent," he said aloud, waiting for the unconscious man to repeat the phrase.

Tarl stirred. "I am Tarl Brent," he repeated with difficulty.

"And I will retain no memory that I might have acquired from the time of the injection until my awakening."

"And I will retain no memory . . ." Tarl whispered.

THE headache was the worst yet," S-14 shook his head dejectedly.

"You waited until Dr. Mendel arrived before you left, I hope," the Chief Director looked up suddenly at the agent, still in his chauffeur's uniform.

"Mendel was already there. I

wouldn't have been stupid enough to leave him alone."

"And you say you have her picture with you?"

"Here it is," S-14 reached into his breast pocket. "I lifted it from Brent's clothes on the way home."

Charles handed the photograph over the table. The seven other directors strained their necks.

"That was good work," the Chief Director smiled approval. He pressed a button near his elbow. An elderly woman entered and stood by his side.

"This is her picture," he said. "We also know she lived in Broadview six years ago; her name is Marcella Boyland. She may be in this city now."

"I recognize her from the files," the woman said curtly. "I'm sure you'll find ample information on her. She's a subject."

"We ought to have enough information on her!" T. J. retorted. "It cost more than two million to collect all that material—data on everyone he's ever come in contact with and summarized notes on all his ancestors as far back as records go."

The woman took the photograph from T. J.'s outstretched hand and strode through the door she had entered.

TEEN minutes later she re-entered the room. Two men followed. Each carried two filing cabinet drawers. The woman thrust a typewritten

slip of paper at T. J.

"Summarization," she said.

The Chief Director studied the sheet; smiled, then sighed.

"Marcella Jean Boyland," he read. "Twenty-eight. Contact with him from twenty-two years, one hundred and forty-six days, his life, to twenty-five years, two hundred and thirteen days. Current residence, 2247 Shakespeare. Occupation, saleslady, Marton Clothiers. Present location, 2249 Shakespeare, visiting neighboring apartment. Expected to remain there until approximately eleven forty-five." *

T. J. reached into one of the filing cabinet drawers which the attendants held. He withdrew a handful of eight-by-ten photographs, glancing at several, and passed them around the table to the other directors.

"She was apprised of the situation at twenty-nine years and forty-two days," the Chief Director referred to the summarization slip again. "Post-hypnotic suggestion administered to erase conscious knowledge of appraisal, as is routine with all who have contacted him. Co-operative type. The information and plan can be reactivated in her mind immediately. Estimated time of reactivation, eighteen minutes . . ."

"But T. J.," one of the directors protested. "Do you think it would be wise to reactivate her as an agent?"

"I think she should be reactivat-

ed," T. J. set his jaw rigidly, looked into the faces of the others. The majority nodded in agreement.

"I've been close to the situation," S-14 offered. "If I might add my opinion, I'd hazard the guess that it has a fairly good chance of working. As a matter of fact, I'd say that is the only chance."

A red-faced man, clad in a rubberoid smock, burst into the room. There was a frantic look in his eyes.

"T. J.! T. J.!" the man shouted in an alarmed voice. "It's radioactive material! *There isn't any left!*"

The directors looked at one another in stunned silence.

"All radioactive materials have ceased to be radioactive," the man continued. "We checked it in our laboratories after we got wind of it from our agents in government atomic projects throughout the country—and in Russia, too."

"All the radioactives—all the thorium, radium, uranium—every bit of it . . . Nothing but stable matter now! You can check our supplies downstairs."

T. J. continued to stare grim-lipped.

"Of course, the governments have classified the matter as secret. All holders of permits to possess radioactives are being ordered to keep silent about it."

"The sleeper arouses," one of the

directors shook his head forlornly. His eyes were watery. "The sleeper stirs, slowly—a little at a time.

"If only there were some place to hide, gentlemen . . . Some place to go . . . But it's all so useless. We could remove ourselves to the remotest corner of the universe—even beyond the universe. But *you can't escape!*—YOU CAN'T ESCAPE!"

CHAPTER III

TARL'S skull felt as though it were expanding and contracting rhythmically as he had breakfast with Dr. Mendel in the dining room of his home the next morning. He ate slowly, doubtful that digestion of the food was a probability. The pain in his head had all but disappeared. And he wanted to do nothing that would bring it back. He was in no hurry anyway; he had told his office not to expect him.

By the time he had finished eating, the sensation and nausea had gone, leaving only a listlessness. Before leaving for his office, Dr. Mendel prescribed complete rest. He also arranged an appointment for an examination at the clinic the following morning.

Mendel gone, Tarl decided against a return to bed. He felt his condition would be mollified more readily if he spent the day outdoors—basking in the autumn sun and clear air.

Charles was quiet, too, as he drove Tarl to the large park several miles away. "Don't want me to wait for you, do you?" the chauffeur asked as Tarl left the car.

"No. Don't bother. I'll telephone you if I need you."

He walked several blocks through tree-arched lanes. A light breeze rustled the crisp leaves on the ground, but it was warm. And it was unusually quiet—it seemed to be the first time in years that he had found solitude. A slim chance anybody would have spying on him here, he reflected. Widely separated, lean trees and open lawns spread beyond the thin shrubs that lined the roadway.

He reached the end of the main lane and entered the zoo, almost deserted in the early morning hour. Still feeling the effects of the previous night's illness, he found a bench near a row of lions' cages. Relaxing on the stone seat, he let his shoulders sag.

Involuntarily, his mind returned to its quest for an explanation of what he considered weird events. Perhaps he had been mistaken all along about persons following him . . . Perhaps the headaches had some connection with his suspicions. Were those suspicions unfounded? Could it be that he was affected by a psychological condition? If people were really "guarding" him incessantly, why wouldn't they trail him into a park? Certainly, there was no one

around now . . .

Only a zoo attendant was in sight, spearing bits of paper with a pointed stick and depositing the trash in a large bag he carried at his hip . . . Not a thing unusual about the man.

Tarl smiled inwardly. He was going to convince himself this time, he thought. He was going to approach the man, engage him in conversation, satisfy himself there was nothing odd here. Else, he would continue being suspicious of everyone.

He had already risen and was walking forward when his eyes fell on the next bench. A girl sat there, until now hidden by shrubbery between the two benches. Her head was lowered and she was reading a book. Suddenly, she looked up. Tarl started . . . No, he thought, *it couldn't be!*

THE girl dropped the book in her lap and looked more intently at him.

"Marcella!" he said incredulously as he neared her.

"Tarl!" the girl rose uncertainly.

"Marcella," he took her hands. "Of all the places to meet—you!"

"Why, Tarl, I—I didn't recognize you. You're heavier! Why, I do believe you're healthier too. Are you—are you . . . ?"

"Cured? Of course. I . . ."

"But, Tarl—how . . . What are you doing now? You look so, so prosperous!"

They sat on the bench again, remained there for more than an hour telling each other of what had happened to them during the past six years and uttering exclamations of wonderment over the chance meeting.

While he studied her face and made mental notation of the small lines that had formed there since they had last seen each other, she told him of her job, where she was employed, her friends.

He noticed with a satisfying glow that she was as pretty as she had ever been. There had been changes—she was a little thinner than he had remembered her. And her care-free attitude had dissolved into one of partial restraint. But, as before, she was very attractive. And her charm was still the same. Completely natural, unaffected.

She always had Tuesday off, she told him. And she frequently came to the park to read.

. . . Before the day was over they had had lunch and seen a show. It was late evening before he escorted her to her apartment. And it was only with the promise she would have dinner with him the following evening. He walked to the corner drug store and telephoned Charles.

While waiting for the chauffeur, he reflected on the changes he had noticed in Marcella. Had there been changes at all? Or, was it merely that during the intervening six years he had adorned his memory of the girl

to the extent that on meeting her again she did not coincide with his mental image of her?

At any rate, he shrugged his shoulders and smiled, the thrill on seeing her again was welcome.

CHARLES was driving slowly when the siren sounded behind them.

"Fire engine," he exclaimed, bringing the car to a stop at the curb.

"Sure," Tarl stretched his neck looking ahead. "Fire's right up there, in this block."

As he spoke, what had been small flames barely visible in several windows of a three-story building on the corner erupted into a seething inferno. The fire engine dashed past and screeched to a stop. Other engines drew up behind it.

"Might as well get out and enjoy it," Tarl said, opening the door.

Charles followed him across the street. "Don't get too close, boss," he urged.

Police hadn't arrived yet to manage the spectators.

Charles and his employer pushed their way across the maze of hoses that already had criss-crossed the surface of the roadway. A crowd was gathering and pressing close to the burning building. Firemen tried unsuccessfully to scurry them several times.

"I'm enjoying this," Tarl smiled. "That your car over there, bud-

dy?" a fireman tugged suddenly at his sleeve. "You gotta back it out. It's in the way."

"Go move it, Charles," Tarl ordered.

"Come with me."

"Why? I'll wait here for you."

"But it might be dangerous!"

"Nuts! Go ahead and . . ."

"I hate to break up this 'yes-no' act," the fireman shouted. "If you don't move the damned thing quick, we're gonna *knock* it outta the way with Number Thirty-Two Engine!"

Charles glanced at the fireman, then at Tarl. His decision forced, he turned and ran to the car.

"And you'd better get back too, buddy," the fireman warned Tarl.

THE crackling sound was the first warning Tarl received. He jerked his head upward and terror transformed his face as he saw a section of the parapet wall crumbling. Bricks were falling onto the iron-work of the fire-escape and bouncing off in a wide arc overhead. He was turning to run when he felt arms wrap around his legs and a rugged shoulder hit him roughly below his knees. Someone had tackled him.

As he fell to the wet pavement, he saw the other three men flying toward him. They landed atop him and the man who had thrown the tackle joined the three in a mass of humanity that pressed him to the street.

He tried to struggle, but the weight

of the four men held him motionless. Then he heard the *thuds* of falling bricks hitting all around. Duller *thuds* signified bricks striking the umbrella of men that protected his body.

Finally the rain of stone halted. Three of the men who had lain on him rose. A fourth—the one who had thrown him to the pavement—did not rise. He lay still, mumbling unintelligibly. A deep gash in his scalp bled freely. Tarl saw splinters of bone protruding from the wound. He knelt by the man.

"Oh, God!" the injured man's words came faintly. "Oh, God! Did he escape? Did he get away? Oh, God!"

Tarl looked over the agonized form at the other three men. A crowd had gathered around and firemen were running toward the injured person. The three men stared at one another, fear freezing their faces. One of them reached into his pocket.

"Look out!" A woman screamed, her eyes fastened in fright. "He's got a gun!"

Tarl leaped to his feet. One of the trio was aiming a revolver at the injured man's head. He pressed the trigger. Even before the echo of the shot died, the three whirled around and broke through the opening the terrorized crowd had made for them.

The man in the street was dead—a purplish hole in his forehead marking the bullet's point of entry.

Sprinting through the crowd, Tarl spotted the trio rounding a corner. He raced after them.

Headlights shone suddenly on his back and he glanced quickly over his shoulder as the car drove up. He was in luck! It was Charles!

He leaped into the automobile.

"Quick, Charlie! Those men running up there . . . get them!"

CHARLES let out the clutch. The action was too fast and, going through a bucking motion, the engine died. He started it again. Perspiration formed around the chauffeur's collar as he shifted into first and drove off, slowly at first—until Tarl urged more speed.

One of the fleeing men turned and fired the revolver. From the direction of the tongue of flame, Tarl saw the shot had not been aimed at the car; rather, it had been directed into the air.

Charles shouted hoarsely and swung the vehicle sharply around the only corner between them and the three men.

"You damned fool!" Tarl shouted. "I want to catch those men! They aren't going to hurt us!"

"They've got a gun, boss!" Charles fed more gas to the engine.

"Turn left at this corner. We'll swing around and head them off!"

"Look, boss," Charles pressed the accelerator closer to the floorboard. "I don't give a damn if it means my job and your friendship. But, I

sure in hell ain't gonna go chasing after anybody with a gun!"

Tarl let out a breath of anger, leaned back in the seat. He knew it was too late now to continue the chase.

"Okay, Charlie . . . Let's go home."

T. J. paced the floor in front of the board table. Every seat was occupied except his. As many additional persons, both men and women, perched tensely on the edge of chairs against the walls of the large room.

The Chief Director stopped and mopped his brow. "Gentlemen," he said, "the critical phase is here. As much as we've done to avoid it—it's here. We may now have to use the final plans—the ones we had reserved only for the most stringent developments."

Only silence answered him. Then T. J. took his seat.

Dr. Mendel rose. "T. J., I've a suggestion I think we might do well to consider. We all agree that suspicion welling in his mind is causing all this. I've already convinced him he needs a complete rest. It may not be too difficult to convince him further that my sanitarium in Coveville is the proper place to get that rest."

The directors mulled over his offer.

"You could call off all our agents then," he continued. "And, at the

same time, you could be certain he would be as safe as if he were roaming the streets with twenty of our men following him. I will stay with him continuously. I assure you he would at no time be more than fifty feet away from me."

T. J. shook his head solicitously. "No, Mendel . . . I doubt if that would be the proper course. He would only have time to dwell mentally on what has happened. That might produce an adverse effect."

The psychiatrist spread his hands in resignation and sat down.

"It's just unfortunate," one of the directors said, "that the fire incident had to occur. I'm sure the reintroduction of the girl would have been the answer to everything."

Another director said reflectively, "If only it hadn't been for that scene at the fire!"

A rap sounded on the door. "Come in," T. J. raised his voice.

Marcella entered. "I understand I've been summoned?"

"Yes," T. J. drew another chair to the table. "All principals have been summoned. And it so happens you are at present the most important."

She swept the room with her eyes, her face showing signs of recognition as she spotted acquaintances interspersed among the group. There were Tarl's two business partners, his secretary, the chauffeur, her landlady and Tarl's landlady from

Broadview. Marcella sat beside the Chief Director.

"We may need you," he informed her, "for details and a further report. Of course, A-1," T. J. cleared his throat, "you've been informed of the reason for this extraordinary session?"

"I was told only that it was of the utmost importance that I get here quickly."

"Well, Miss Boyland," he used her name for the first time, "it seems there has been another milestone!"

The girl's eyebrows raised.

"Yes, another milestone," he repeated. "And this time it was with no coincident headache or other overt manifestation on his part."

Marcella twisted the handkerchief she held in her hands into knots.

"Do you know what that means, A-1?" T. J. whispered.

"Yes," she shuddered. "It means the *thing* is now starting to act independent of him."

"And," he let his hand drop on the table, "the matter is practically completely out of our hands . . . In case you're interested, the milestone is the Pythagorean Proposition."

"Pythagorean Proposition?" she twisted the words with her tongue.

"Yes. It's been refuted. The heretofore accepted proposition that the sum of the squares of the two sides of a right triangle is equal to the square of the hypotenuse. Our ma-

thematical section discovered it only an hour ago in their continuing research project. Of course, it will be several days before independent scientists learn about it.

"Our math section was able to bracket the time it occurred to within a half-hour. That time corresponds with the fire incident!"

Silence descended in the room again.

A man at the end of the table rose. "I suggest that since everything is so far gone now, the only thing left for us to do is to call him in and attempt to make contact with *it* through his conscious and subconscious."

"No! No!" Dr. Mendel shouted. But the frantic plea went unnoticed in the din of other protests.

"Impossible!" T. J. agreed with the remonstrating faction. "That's utterly ridiculous. Do you think *it* would regard *us* as being significant enough even to communicate with us? Do you think *it* would regard anything at all as being significant?"

The man on the side of the individual who had risen placed a hand on his shoulder and forced him back to the seat. Tightening the grip, he said:

"T. J.'s right. Even if it would condescend to communicate with us, the chances are a hundred to one that it would do nothing to keep our system intact."

"Gentlemen," Marcella rose, "if everything is so hopeless, I see no

reason for my continuing this sham—this pretense."

"But," T. J.'s eyes were grim. "You must! Don't you see, you're our only hope!"

"Why should I continue?" the girl said bitterly. "I've been through the files . . . through his files. He's good. He's even noble. And he's completely innocent. And it just happens that I'm in love with him. I can't see perpetuating this hoax; fooling him like we've been doing all along—especially when the sham is nothing more than a weapon to fight or appease it."

"But," the Chief Director protested. "It's not him we're fooling. It's what's behind him—in him—that we're trying to protect ourselves against!"

"It's still him, as far as I can see," the girl replied.

"Your participation," T. J. spoke sternly, "is part of the plan. If you don't do your share voluntarily, we will call in Mendel and have him administer a treatment . . . Then you will do it involuntarily—but just as effectively."

A middle-aged man walked around the table to Marcella's side. He took her hand between his and patted it. "And don't forget, miss, it's not just we who hang in the balance . . . It's this entire world. The whole universe is in your hand . . . You can't fail us!"

Marcella bit her lips and sat down, her features pale . . .

CHAPTER IV

THE needle didn't hurt going in, but nausea coursed through Tarl's body immediately. He strengthened his hold on the edge of the metal table on which he sat. But he realized his grip was feeble and barely prevented him from toppling to the tiled floor of Mendel's examination room.

"This shot isn't going to put you completely under," Mendel said, placing the syringe on the table behind him and turning to face Tarl.

The outline of Mendel's face was vague and Tarl shook his head to clear the film from his eyes. Other injections administered by the psychiatrist, he recalled, had not affected him this way. This sensation was different—it was as though he had been drugged. He wondered whether he had received an injection of sodium amytal.

"No, Brent," Mendel's voice was mocking, booming. "No—not sodium amytal. But something that has a lot of sodium amytal in it . . . This is a very special concoction."

Tarl dimly realized then that he had not been reflecting mentally on the nature of the drug—that he had spoken his thoughts aloud without being aware of it . . .

"Yes, Brent," Mendel's voice came again. "You have been thinking aloud. This is an effect of this injection. It has one other major effect . . . It will be impossible for

you to remember any of what transpires while you are under its influence. For instance, I could torture you—half kill you . . .”

A fist rammed against the side of Tarl's face, but his senses were dulled beyond interpretation of pain. The blow snapped his head to one side and sent him sprawling to the floor. Seized with both fury and puzzlement, he commanded his body to leap to its feet. But there was no response. Instead, he lay limp until the doctor grasped his shoulders and forced him to a standing position.

“I was saying, Brent.” Mendel continued, “that I could half kill you and you would remember nothing about it when you walk out of here . . . But physical torture of the type that leaves its evidence might not work. And it might bring about your death at the wrong moment . . .

“Oh, yes, you'll have to die, but it'll have to be at the right moment. But that's nothing to regret, for you would die regardless. You see, there are but two alternatives—either you die and we make *it* a part of me, or everybody, including you, dies and everything disintegrates into nothingness. I prefer the former of the alternatives.”

TARL, his reasoning power reduced to a minimum by the drug, only half realized what Mendel was saying. He was vaguely aware that the psychiatrist was

strapping him to a metal-armed chair against the wall. He mustered his power of concentration and focused his vision on Mendel—brought the impression of the face clearly to his brain for the first time since the injection. There he saw a sardonically leering mask of hate, etched with inscrutable purpose.

He tried to hold the image in focus. And, as he looked, he saw Mendel's hands become clearer as they approached his face bearing thin, stiff wire prongs.

“This won't hurt—much,” the psychiatrist said. “It may irritate a little as the electrodes slip past your eyeballs and into the cerebral hemispheres . . . *Keep your eyes opened!*”

Tarl realized his eyelids had started to close instinctively. But the command held them rigidly open. He tried to thrust his head aside in defense, but the muscles in his neck were tense and would not respond.

He wanted to scream as the wires slipped through flesh and scraped bone, but the body that was being subjected to the torture was no longer his.

“Shock, you see,” Mendel's voice was heavy with sarcasm, “is necessary for this treatment. I deeply regret that there must be this inconvenience. But there must be torture, agony, to accomplish the purpose—and it must be mental so there will be no physical vestiges.”

The vibratory sensation in Tarl's

brain was evidence that a current had been applied to the electrodes. Terror filled his being. He wanted to scream and tear the instruments from his head. At the same time he wanted to rationalize and seek an explanation for Mendel's actions. But he could do neither.

"You are no longer in this laboratory," the psychiatrist's harsh voice was a whisper. "You are walking on the edge of a steep, tremendously high cliff. Below, the sea is pounding furiously against the sharp crags . . ."

SUDDENLY, Mendel's voice was no longer there—nor was the laboratory. Only Tarl, the cliff, the sea, the rocks. He tried to back away from the edge, but he couldn't. There was an unseen force pushing him forward—toward the edge—across the edge . . . Then he was falling and screaming. His body began rotating and the crags loomed closer—*closer—CLOSER!* The abject terror was something that was driving his entire mentality toward destruction. He closed his eyes so he would not witness visually the moment of impact . . . *

But the impact did not come. And the excruciating sensation of falling was no longer there. Cautiously, he opened his eyes again. He was no where near the precipitous cliff or the sea . . . He was standing in waist-high grass on a misty veldt. But he was not alone.

There were natives with spears on either side of him. He, holding a rifle, and the natives were facing in the direction from which wild shrieks and roars were coming. Then a crazed herd of gigantic elephants rushed upon them. Huge trunks seized natives and hurled them into the air; sent them crashing to the ground. Great tusks pierced other bodies. And ponderous hoofs stomped those humans who had fallen into unrecognizable forms.

Then one of the beasts was towering above him, rearing up on its hind legs, shrieking its wrath . . .

But it wasn't the elephant that crashed down on Tarl. It was a small, round, notched object. He picked it from the ground, his eyes squinting in perplexity. Then he recognized it. The thing was a hand grenade! Its pin had been drawn! Screaming again, he tossed it away. It exploded beyond the ridge. He looked at himself, around him; discovered he was dressed in a soldier's uniform. And the sounds of artillery, small weapons fire, battle were everywhere.

Another grenade landed at his feet. He tossed it away frantically. There was a flame thrower aimed at him from behind another ridge. He dodged its fiery tongue of death. Panic-stricken, he dropped to the ground and groveled for cover which he knew wasn't at hand as the machine gun opened fire from less than twenty feet away. The

flame thrower redirected its aim and three additional grenades landed near his body.

His mind went blank momentarily and suddenly there was only Mendel's voice. And he knew the effects of the drug were wearing off. Only vaguely could he remember the fearful ordeals that his imagination had conjured up for him. Still less clearly could he recall Mendel's words and actions prior to the frightful experiences. It was all the result of a flight of fancy, he told himself, even as the memory of the imagined experiences erased themselves from his mind . . .

TARL Brent was visibly shaken during the next two days. He remembered going to Mendel's office and being given an injection that had lulled him into a dreamless sleep. Yet he had the impression that slumber had drained him of all his energy.

He abandoned his business office, informing his secretary the doctor had ordered complete rest. The evenings of the two days he spent with Marcella. And he felt that it was her presence that gave him the determination to fight against the lethargy that gripped him.

By the evening of the third day following his laboratory visit he had convinced himself he would some day ask Marcella to marry him. After taking her home that night he spent several hours sitting before

the open hearth in his living room, carefully thinking things out. He crushed a cigarette in an ash tray and hurled it into the fire. A plan had suggested itself spontaneously. He banged a fist on the arm of the chair and smiled grimly. Before he went to bed he examined his thirty-eight caliber revolver. He slept soundly after that.

CHARLES accompanied him in the morning to the Pradow Private Detective Agency office. The chauffeur sat beside him while he explained the nature of the visit to a ruddy-faced individual who sat behind a desk.

"So," he concluded, "that's the story."

"And you figure, Mr. Brent," the agency official stared out a window, "that you can have some of our men follow you and see whether you have any other shadows?"

Tarl nodded.

"This is a new one," the official smiled through a cloud of cigar smoke. "Putting a tail on a tail."

"I want more than one. I'll need at least three. I want to make sure we get something in the net."

The official walked to a side door, stuck his head into the next room and spoke to a uniformed man. Three men followed him back into the private office.

"This is Joe Harrison, Mike Vinson and Arthur Homar," said the official. "Boys," he turned to the

men, "Mr. Brent—Tarl Brent—will tell you what he wants."

Tarl again told his problems. Charles interrupted when he was about halfway through to ask leave to telephone the garage about some work on the car.

When Charles returned Tarl was ready to go.

"Wait a minute, boss," Charles said. "You're not going to walk out of here with those guys following behind?"

Tarl glanced askance at the chauffeur.

"If you're really being trailed, whoever is following you will know right off what's happened—seeing you come out a private detective's office with three men behind you."

"Thanks," said Tarl. "That's using your head." He turned to the detectives:

"Start in on the job at four o'clock this afternoon. I'll be home at that time . . ."

MARCELLA was dressed smart-
er than he had ever remembered when Tarl escorted her into a cocktail lounge that evening. A tight-fitting, wool skirt brought out the highlights of her figure in smooth curves. They took a table next to the orchestra, ordered highballs and spent the next few minutes listening to muted ballads that floated from the bandstand.

As Marcella sipped her drink, he scanned the room casually.

"What's wrong, Tarl?" she asked suddenly.

"Wrong?"

"Yes. Why are you so nervous? Who're you looking for?"

"No one, Marcella . . . You're imagining things."

He noticed at that moment that two men were seating themselves at an adjoining table. He half nodded toward them.

"I saw that, Tarl!" Marcella said, moving closer to him. "Who are those men? What is this all about?"

"Forget it, please," he shook his head. "There's nothing that concerns you."

"It *does* concern me—I'm here with you!"

"Now look, Marcella," he reached for her hand, "we came here to . . ."

"Come on, Tarl," she folded her arms. "Out with it. I *want* to know."

He sighed resignedly. "Okay. It's like this . . ."

Tarl told her he had proof he was being followed constantly and had engaged help to solve the enigma. "An incident that occurred on the evening of the day at the park convinced me of my suspicions," he added, telling her about the happening at the fire.

"You see, Marcella," he concluded. "Whatever they're trying to keep from me must be pretty important—important enough to justify the murder of that injured man when they realized he would be identified

and questioned."

"Now I'm really worried," distress shown on the girl's face. "Why are they following you? Have you done anything that might have placed you in danger?"

Taking her arm, he tried to allay her fears by bringing her on the dance floor. They waltzed through one number and danced at a rapid tempo to the next selection. But when they returned to the table the girl was still moody.

"Tarl," she said uncertainly, "suppose I said I thought you ought to forget about it—quit thinking of people chasing you . . . If you are being followed you haven't been harmed. And you might be! If they used a gun at the fire, they're dangerous."

"Now, hold on there!" he protested. "You're trying to advise me when you don't know anything about the circumstances—only what I've told you."

"Tarl, *please* forget about it!"

"Marcella," he laughed. "You're going to have me getting suspicious of you, too . . . You know, I could question that chance meeting between you and me the other day. The odds were pretty much against it in a city this size."

"Oh, Tarl!" Marcella placed a cool, trembling hand on his wrist. "Don't you see you could hurt yourself—physically—if those suspicions are founded? Mentally—if they're not? Please, Tarl," her eyes were

beseeching, "everything's been *so* nice."

HE took her hand in his and smiled. The music welled and filled the room with gaiety. Then, suddenly, the orchestra exploded into a cacophony of discordant sounds.

While the drummer beat a sustaining, unaffected rhythm, a trumpet player was standing before his chair puffing his cheeks frenziedly but no sounds were coming from his horn.

A clarinetist was having the same difficulty, while a bank of trombonists continued to produce normal, mellow chords. The orchestration sounded as though someone had whacked entire passages from the arrangement for each wind instrument. At one corner of the bandstand the pianist struck his keyboard repeatedly but only plunking sounds resulted. The players quit trying in startled confusion.

Instruments back in their racks, they stared at one another, dumfoundedly. Several persons in the audience laughed, believing they were witnessing a novelty number. The manager of the establishment stormed across the floor and stood before the band, his hands rolled into fists and thrust against his hips.

"What goes on here?" he demanded.

"Something's way the hell outta whack!" the piano player said. "Look, I can play the scale up to here," he demonstrated, running his

fingers over keys from the bass side of the board to middle E. "But the next bunch of notes are blank!" He continued up the keyboard, drawing only toneless *plunks* from the piano.

"Well," the manager hunched his shoulders. "Get the damned thing fixed!"

"But," one of the trumpet players raised his instrument, "the same thing's wrong with my horn!—It won't go past the E above middle C." He demonstrated, blowing a series of notes from low C. After he passed middle E only a string of hissing sounds came from the bell of the instrument.

"Okay, boys," the manager turned to walk off, "cut the comedy. If you're tired, take a fifteen-minute break. But don't try clowning when it ain't on the program."

Patrons seated close to the orchestra laughed again. Tarl was frowning, however.

"Excuse me a minute," Marcella touched his arm. "I'm going to powder my nose."

"A-i!" T. J. held up his free hand as he pressed the telephone closer to his ear. He signaled silence from Mendel who sat across the table. "Where are you calling from?"

Marcella gave the name and address of the cocktail lounge.

"This is important, T. J.," she said sharply. "I think there's been another milestone!"

"What do you mean?"

"Something happened out here . . . And again, there was no simultaneous headache."

She told him of the bandstand incident.

"We'll have it checked right away," T. J. cupped his hand over the mouthpiece and barked orders to Mendel. The psychiatrist hurriedly left the room.

"This is terrible!" T. J. said into the telephone. "What happened? Did anything go wrong?"

Marcella flustered. But she managed successfully to withhold information on the nature of the conversation between her and Tarl that had preceded the incident.

"I'd better get back, T. J.," she said. "I don't want to stay away too long."

"Yes," he agreed. "Get back as fast as you can. You're our only key to him now!"

T. J. slammed the phone in its cradle and lighted a cigarette. He was puffing at it rapidly when Mendel re-entered the room.

"They'll have the results in a few minutes," the psychiatrist said.

"Again he was *not* suspicious when it happened," T. J. drawled, shaking his head. ". . . At least, not overtly so."

"There's a chance he was suspicious but the suspicion wasn't apparent to the girl," Mendel shrugged. "Remember, we don't have

the checks we used to have—now that we've withdrawn all but the essential agents. And I don't trust the girl. Not one damned bit!"

"He showed no sign of a headache either," T. J. mused absently. "We'll receive a report from one of the three detectives in a little while, I hope, and get a cross-check on what happened."

"Indoctrinating those detectives was a smart idea, wasn't it?" Mendel dropped to a chair. "Lucky S-14 thought of the plan when he went to the agency office with Brent."

"Yes," T. J. cupped his hands on the back of his head and stared at the ceiling. "You might say that was one of the best breaks we've had in the entire project."

"Any trouble indoctrinating them?"

"Not a bit . . . Of course, they put up a little resistance when we snagged them. But they took the indoctrination in less than two hours' time. Activation was only a matter of a few seconds. With them on the job we were able to release practically all our agents from close range duty."

"I think you should have released *all* of them."

"No-o-o. Couldn't take that chance. Had to leave a few."

"But, T. J., he's only going to get suspicious again . . ." Mendel stood and placed his fists on his hips. "Why don't you let me take

him to the sanitarium . . . As things stand now, I can only give him partial treatment. If I had him in confinement he would be under constant attention and treatment."

A LABORATORY worker entered the room, his steps hurried with excitement.

"It checks, all right, T. J.," he said nervously. "The girl was right. A whole chunk gone out of the sonic scale—one octave, to be exact—beginning precisely where A-1 reported."

"There'll be the devil to pay for this!" the Chief Director slapped his knees. "Something like a missing octave can't go unnoticed. The papers will be full of it tomorrow!"

"Good thing it wasn't lower in the scale," Mendel observed. "Or it might have fallen in the sonic range of human speech. As it is now, singers will start wondering why they can't strike some notes, just as those musicians did."

T. J. was perspiring profusely. "It's going to be rough," he said. "This is the first milestone that will have a direct and immediate effect on the average person."

"Chief," the laboratory worker asked hopefully, "you don't think these milestones are going to be permanent?"

"Probably not. At least, the board has suggested we can expect them to last for a period of several weeks, maybe even months, after we re-

verse *its* awakening. It'll take time for the *thing* to become completely dormant again—and a little more time after that for *it* to rebuild what has been unintentionally torn down. But there isn't too much to worry about on that score. If the *thing* goes back to sleep, everything will be all right again—eventually. If it doesn't, it won't make any difference whether these handfuls of manifestations are erased . . . because *everything will be obliterated!*"

The worker bit a fingernail.

"But," T. J. continued, "there's still hope left. Things were going along smoothly for a while before this last occurrence, which happened three days after the one immediately preceding it. All the manifestations before the last one were occurring closer together, with ever shortening time intervals between them . . . Perhaps the next one won't come for several days. Maybe the *thing* is beginning to withdraw itself again."

But the Chief Director's voice lacked confidence . . .

CHAPTER V

WHEN Marcella came back to the table, Tarl asked suddenly:

"Care to go for a drive?"

"Where'll we go?"

"It's early; we can get some fresh air and make a late show somewhere else."

The girl smiled approval and they made their way to the anteroom. He fished for his hat check while Marcella entered a nearby restroom.

His hat in hand, he asked one of the attendants to tell his chauffeur they were ready. Then he sat in a cushioned chair facing the front of the room where he could watch the doorways to both the restroom and the entrance. A mirror over the main door caught his eye. Through it he could see back into the dance hall. He lighted a cigarette and leaned back.

Still watching the mirror, he saw a man he did not know stepping through the doorway from the dance hall. The man placed a foot over the threshold but halted immediately as his eyes fell on the back of Tarl's head. Then he quickly withdrew into the other room.

Tarl felt an impulse to turn around and investigate further. But he realized he enjoyed an advantage and froze in his position, refusing to betray the fact he had spotted his pursuer. He tightened his lips and waited.

Within seconds, the face peered through the doorway again. Tarl studied him. He could see nothing sinister or cruel about the face; nor, on the other hand, could he detect anything benevolent.

Had the detectives spotted the man also? If so, what were they doing? Certainly they could see the individual. Why, he wondered, didn't they

nab him right there?

The face disappeared again and Tarl started breathing easier. His hand slipped around his right hip and felt the revolver in his back pocket; he closed his fingers on it reassuringly. Then he turned his eyes away from the mirror.

Minutes passed. The front fender and hood of the black Limousine appeared outside, abreast of the canopied entrance. The door to the restroom opened. He started to rise, but didn't when he saw that the woman who came out was not Marcella. The woman strode past him and into the dance hall. He followed her motions through the mirror. She hadn't progressed more than four feet beyond the door when she halted abruptly. She turned her head to the right. The man who had been watching Tarl said something to her. She nodded and continued into the other room.

MARCELLA came out. Tarl took her by the arm and walked toward the exit. He tightened his fingers around her elbow suddenly, however, and pulled her to a stop just short of the door. Marcella gasped in surprise.

"When we get outside," he instructed in a whisper, "get in the car as fast as you can! Tell Charles to drive forward about fifty feet and wait."

"Tarl!" she was breathing rapidly. "What are you going to do?"

"Don't ask questions now!"

"But, Tarl, what's all this mystery about?"

"Don't argue!" His tone grew sterner as he opened the door and propelled her onto the sidewalk.

Outside, she opened her mouth to protest again. But he pulled the rear door of his automobile open and half shoved her inside. He glanced over his shoulder at the same time, making sure his actions could not be observed by the man who had been watching him. Marcella sat on the edge of the seat. He pushed his head into the car.

"Charles, drive up by that tree and wait for me . . . Quick!"

"What's . . . ?"

"Dammit! I can't explain now—there's no time. Just drive up there—fast!"

He stepped away from the car and slammed the door. Charles shrugged and drove away.

Tarl removed the revolver from his hip pocket, closing his hand tightly around it. He replaced the weapon in his side coat pocket, but left his hand in there with it, the cold steel of the weapon becoming moist with perspiration from his palm. He leaped across the sidewalk and concealed himself behind one of two potted evergreen plants that bracketed the entrance to the cocktail lounge.

He waited a minute. Then another. And, just when he began to doubt that the man had, after all, been following him, the door opened.

PEERING out through the door, the man looked in each direction. Cautiously, he walked onto the sidewalk.

Waiting a moment, he placed his hands in his pockets and stepped farther away from the entrance. He looked to the right and saw Tarl's parked Limousine. He started; leaped back.

But Tarl had abandoned his hiding place and had interposed himself between the man and the door, withdrawing the revolver at the same time.

"Don't move!" He pressed the barrel of the weapon into the man's back. "Don't put your hands up! Keep them in your pockets. And don't turn around—just start walking."

The man began a protest.

"Don't talk," Tarl spoke lowly. "Get going."

With a hesitancy, the man walked down the sidewalk. Tarl looked quickly behind them. No one was there; no one was coming out the building. He swept the sidewalk ahead of him and behind him as he walked. Again, no one in sight.

Then he scanned the walk on the opposite side of the street . . . Still nobody. He had half expected, despite his plan, that someone would be there to snatch away his prey. He even considered the possibility that someone might be stationed nearby at all times with the sole purpose of killing anyone he might

manage to apprehend.

They reached the Limousine. Tarl opened the front door—thrust the gun harder into the man's back.

"Look," the man hesitated, "if this is a holdup . . ."

Marcella screamed, "Tarl! You've got a gun!"

Charles twisted around in the seat. "Boss, what . . .?"

"Get in," Tarl caught the man by the shoulder.

"Tarl! What are you doing?" Marcella started to get out of the car.

"Never mind," he told her, waving the gun in the air. "We'll see who's suspicious! We'll find out what's behind all this!"

He pushed the man in; closed the door. Then he got in the rear and perched on the edge of the cushion.

"You can't do this, boss!" Charles wailed. "You can't get away with intimidating a citizen with a gun!"

"Just start driving, Charlie," Tarl rested his hand on the seat behind the stranger, pointing the barrel of the gun at the man's neck.

Charles and Marcella exchanged glances hurriedly. Then the chauffeur hunched his shoulders and sighed. The girl gasped, terror showing in her eyes.

"Look," Tarl said impatiently. "This is one of those guys! I spotted him in the place. I know what I'm doing. I watched him spying on me through a doorway while I was

waiting for you."

Inching the barrel of the revolver forward until it touched the back of the man's neck, he ordered: "Tell them! Tell them you were watching me!"

The man said nothing. He tried to lean forward to get away from the menacing gun. Tarl caught his shoulder roughly and forced him back in the seat.

"Tell them!" he shouted.

The man remained silent, looking imploringly in the direction of the chauffeur.

Tarl let out a hiss of air through his lips.

"Okay, Charlie," he said. "Let's get away from here. Find some quiet place. This guy'll have plenty to say in a minute."

THE chauffeur started the car reluctantly and drove off. Marcella began to sob. Fuming, Tarl leaned back in the seat.

Blood was not rushing through his temples as fast as it had been when he realized he had at last smoked out his prey. Instead, his head was beginning to throb as it often did before a headache came. He wished desperately the pain wouldn't come back now—return and render him incapable of reaching his goal.

Marcella hid her face in her hands. He put a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off.

"Marcella," he said, "I know

what I'm doing."

"But, Tarl," the girl dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, "I—I don't understand . . . What's come over you? This matter of taking a gun and—and threatening a person . . ."

"This is going to clear everything up, Marcella," he said definitely. "I'm going to find out all the things I've got to know."

Even as he spoke, however, a blade of pain cut a swath through his brain.

"Oh, darling!" she looked anxiously at him. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Where do you want to go, boss?" the chauffeur asked resignedly.

"Head for the warehouse district. It's pretty lonely out in that direction."

He sat on the edge of the seat again, keeping the revolver pointed at the man's head.

"Look, buddy," he said, "you can save yourself this little ride if you start explaining right now."

The man turned his head. Tarl grabbed a handful of hair and twisted the face forward again.

"I—I don't know what you're talking about," the stranger said. Tarl watched a tremor shake the man's body.

Tarl leaned back. "Okay, Charlie," he said. "Find a quiet spot where we can have a little conversation."

The automobile seemed to roll over the streets protestingly. Tarl became silent as the vehicle progressed from the well-lighted, business district, through a small, less brilliantly illuminated, residential area and into the warehouse section near the waterfront.

Only an occasional street light cast dismal, yellow rays onto deserted roadways and sidewalks and against featureless buildings.

"Up there," he said abruptly, pointing to an alleyway between two one-story, corrugated-iron buildings.

Charles slowed the Limousine, but applied the brakes and stopped on the street before entering the alley.

"Boss," he said. "Why don't we just take this bird to the police? They'll find out about him. Then we won't be breaking any laws by kidnapping him like this."

"Yes, Tarl," the girl said anxiously, catching his arm between her trembling hands. "Why don't we do that?"

Tarl shook his head. "No. If you'd suggested that ten minutes ago I might have listened. But right now I'm too close to the answers. Into the driveway, Charlie."

The chauffeur sighed again and started the car rolling in an arc into the alley.

"This is good enough," Tarl instructed after the vehicle had been driven across the sidewalk and out of direct light from the nearest street lamp.

"**N**OW!" Tarl exclaimed, placing the tip of the gun against the man's neck. "Who are you working for? Why were you following me? What do you want?"

The man could have been a statue. He made no sound and showed no sign of motion.

Breath escaped between Tarl's clenched teeth in a rush. He placed his hand back on the man's shoulder. "I . . ."

He winced in his seat and shook his head. The pain was climbing far over his sensory threshold. He closed his eyes and remained motionless a moment.

"I want to know," he ignored the sensation and tightened his grip on the man's shoulder, pushing the barrel deeper into the soft skin. "I want to know who you are . . . right now!"

The man remained silent. Marcella squirmed. Charles turned around; started to speak. But Tarl motioned him silent.

Indignation raced the headache for dominance in Tarl's brain. He knew that if he didn't get the information soon he would black out.

He drew back his left hand and struck the man over the ear. "Talk! Damn you! Talk!"

"I can't! I can't!" the stranger burst into sobbing sound. "If I do . . . Oh! I can't say anything . . . Don't you see that—that the world . . . everything . . ."

More silence.

Tarl cocked the trigger.

Suddenly Charles threw his arm over the back of the seat and hit Tarl's wrist. The revolver clattered dully on the matted floor. Marcella threw both arms around him. Off-balance, he toppled from the seat.

"Run! Dammit!" Charles reached across the man and thrust open the door.

"But . . ." the stranger hesitated.

"Don't do a damned thing but run!" Charles pushed him out of the car and he disappeared into the darkness of the alleyway.

Marcella held on to Tarl, her arms wrapped around him, until suddenly his body went limp.

"Charles!" there was fear in her voice. "He's not moving!"

Charles leaped from his seat and ran around the car, opening the rear door. Tarl, who had been leaning against the door, fell outward. Charles caught him.

"He's fainted again!" the chauffeur said, lifting Tarl back onto the seat.

"That means . . ." the girl began fearfully.

THE sky was suddenly lighted by a tremendous bolt of lightning with a sharp blast of thunder. The noise was deafening and Tarl stirred, opened his eyes and looked around.

"Why did you do it?" he rolled his head to one side. "Why did you let him get away?"

Marcella and Charles looked at each other.

"We had to, Tarl," the girl placed her hand soothingly on his forehead. "You were losing control . . . You were going to kill that man."

"No. I wasn't. I . . ." his face contorted. "I . . ." He slumped on the seat.

"Let's get out of here," Marcella said. "Let's get him to headquarters. Something's going to happen—something big . . . He fainted twice! This is dangerous!"

Charles started the car and backed out the alley. When he reached the street and started forward, they had a clear view of the sky. Weird streaks of lightning were racing from horizon to horizon.

He pushed down harshly on the accelerator. The car shot forward. "That lightning," he said to Marcella. "That isn't real lightning—not as we know it!"

His words were barely audible. An almost continuous roll of thunder drowned them out.

"There are no clouds in the sky!" the girl put her mouth next to the chauffeur's ear and shouted.

A bolt struck a warehouse a half-block ahead of them. The blinding flash turned the scene into one of daytime brilliancy. But the building didn't catch fire. Nor were there falling bricks, smoke, collapsing walls. The structure merely disintegrated. Clouds of dust rose upward, swirling and enveloping ad-

jaçent buildings. Only a pile of ash stood on the site where the building had been. Some of it cascaded onto the sidewalk and into the street.

The Limousine ploughed through it as though there was no substance at all, leaving in its wake eddying streams of boiling smoke.

Suddenly the lightning subsided. The skies became dark again.

Marcella was crying. "I'm afraid!" she sobbed. "I'm so afraid!"

Charles hunched over the steering wheel to get a less restricted view of the heavens. He pointed. The girl pressed her head against the window and looked up.

Myriad pinpoints of light were flashing into ephemeral existence among the stars. The pinpoints were growing in size and leaving fiery streaks behind them.

"Meteors!" Charles shouted.

The streaks extinguished themselves before completing their earthward plunge, leaving needle-like strands of illumination in their wake.

"This looks like it," Charles said grimly, stepping harder on the accelerator. "We *may* be looking at the end of the world!"

"You're going to headquarters?" the girl asked terrified.

"Of course," Charles spun the car on two wheels around a corner. "Don't you recognize the area? We're only a few blocks away."

The girl passed her hand several times over Tarl's brow. He was

slumped in a corner. She reached over, caught him by the shoulder and lowered his head against her breasts.

"Poor Tarl," she said, clutching him tighter. "He's the only one of us who doesn't know what's happening!"

A crash sounded in the distance. Another, closer. Then two, almost together.

"What's that?" the girl screamed, pulling Tarl closer.

"The meteors!" Charles shouted. "They're getting bigger! They're hitting!"

Outside, the sky was bristling with streaks of fire. Some of the glowing threads extended to the ground. As the lengthening strands touched the surface, the earth shook. The crashes increased in number and the impacts became more violent. Within seconds, the sound of collisions had become a continuous din.

A huge, flaming ball struck the street a block ahead of them. Its searing heat flooded through the windows and metal panels of the automobile. But the withering wave was only temporary. The fallen object pushed deep into the ground, carried by its impetus. A second later, the surface billowed in the spot—puffed like a bubble forming in a pot of boiling tar.

Charles slammed on the brakes and stopped a hundred feet from the mound. Then the center of the bubble burst, spraying flaming gas a

hundred feet into the air. A steady stream of fire poured from each crack in the bubble, shot towering flames skyward.

The girl screamed in fear. Then the shower of flaming objects dwindled, died completely. In its place came a rain—falling in huge drops and hitting with a ferocity that dented the car's metal surfaces.

Tarl stirred against the girl. And in terror she thrust him from her.

GROANING and regaining consciousness, Tarl straightened in the seat and rubbed his face with trembling hands. Marcella shrank in her corner. And the rain relinquished its bizarre quality, the drops becoming smaller and falling in a more normal fashion.

The girl leaped from the car.

"What are you doing?" Charles shouted.

"I'm afraid," she said without looking back. "Afraid of everything—even him. Don't you realize it's right there—right in the car!"

She stood poised fearfully outside the vehicle, glancing erratically in all directions.

"Marcella," Tarl reached out and clutched at her dress. "Don't leave! Please!"

The girl pulled away from his grip and sprinted up the street. She disappeared in the rain. Tarl grabbed his head in despair, cringing from the pain.

"This damned headache, Charlie," he groaned. *"Why doesn't it go away?"*

The rain stopped. Footsteps sounded outside. Determined footsteps made by feminine heels. Marcella appeared in the open door.

"You've come back!" Tarl tried to smile.

"Yes, Tarl," she re-entered. "I've come back."

He looked around outside the vehicle. The burning bubble loomed into view. He swept his eyes over the street behind them. There were other bubbles—all spewing angry flames skyward. But the glow that bathed the underside of clouds forming over the city told him it would require thousands of such fires to create that degree of illumination.

"What happened?" he jolted upright in his seat, amazement on his face. He looked at the girl, then at Charles. "Was there an attack?"

"Tarl! Oh, Tarl!" Marcella grabbed him again and held him tight, pressing her face to his. Then she began crying.

“THIS is it!" T. J. said, standing by the window and sweeping his eyes over the terrorized faces that peered back at him in the large room at headquarters. "It's broken loose now!"

The building shook viciously. The table moved several inches across the floor as a sudden rumbling became audible. Sounds of objects be-

ing wrested from their moorings throughout the building filled the room.

"Earthquake!" shouted a hysterical woman, clutching desperately to the sides of her chair.

"Only a minor one," T. J. hid his concern with grim resignation. "It's out now," he said listlessly, scanning the scene outside. "It's loose . . ."

"Can anything at all be done?" one of the men ran across the room to the Chief Director's side.

But the two became mute before the window as they watched thousands of fires sending smoke into the sky. A crescent moon was visible. But it seemed like an intangible object—wavering, breaking into several parts and joining into a whole again.

"We can only try and see whether any reasonable course of action remains," T. J. said finally.

"But what are our plans?" the man persisted. "What comes next?"

Another earthquake rocked the building on its foundation.

"If we can only get him here we can try the final plan," the Chief Director returned to the table.

"You mean direct appeal through his conscious?" asked one of the directors with an air of alarm.

"What else is there left to do?" T. J. spread his arms. "We don't have to worry about awakening *it* fully now. *It's* already awake. And we have no reason to believe *it* will

ever recede to the subconscious level —into inactivity. If we can only get him here we can start treatment immediately . . . Dr. Mendel!" He scanned the sea of faces in the room.

"Mendel's in the lab preparing his equipment," someone volunteered. Then the man stuck his head through a side door and shouted the psychiatrist's name.

MENDEL entered the room, his hair tousled and his eyes scanning the assembly nervously.

"You have everything ready?" T. J. snapped.

"I'm all prepared," Mendel said, withdrawing a syringe from his pocket and holding it where T. J. could see it. "I can administer the injection within ten seconds after he is produced . . .

"But," Mendel's voice cracked and became frantic. "Where is he? What's holding him? Why isn't he here now?"

"There's no way of knowing," T. J. was calm again. "All means of communicating with our agents have been eliminated. But all agents had explicit instructions to produce him at headquarters as rapidly as possible should Phase Z develop. There's nothing we can do but wait here."

Mendel's hands clutched T. J.'s arms. "But we've got to find him, T. J.! *We've got to find him!*"

A frown of puzzlement crossed the Chief Director's face. "You be-

lieve," he shrugged off Mendel's hands, "that by elevating his subconscious to the same plane as his conscious that you will be able to establish direct communication?"

"We *should* be able to," Mendel looked at the floor and became a degree calmer. "We've been rather close to direct communication on a couple of . . ."

The psychiatrist stopped abruptly in mid-sentence.

T. J.'s eyes glowered and his hands clenched into fists as he stared at Mendel.

The Chief Director gasped and said accusingly, "Mendel! What do you mean!—You've been close!"

Fear shone in the psychiatrist's eyes as he backed away. A sudden calmness blanketed the din in the room.

T. J. stepped forward and grasped the doctor by his coat lapels. "You have been secretly attempting contact!" he accused.

"Watch out!" someone screamed. "He's got a gun, T. J.!"

There were other screams and several directors rushed forward as Mendel leaped around to the rear of the Chief Director, thrust the muzzle of the weapon into his back and shouted a warning to the others to stay away.

With T. J. as a shield, Mendel retreated to the wall—away from the threatening crowd.

"And," the Chief Director shook his head, stunned, "I didn't even

suspect there might be someone among us who was trying to *awaken* the thing while we were attempting to return it to its lethargy! If anybody could sabotage the project, Mendel, I should have known it would be you!"

"You fool!" Mendel whispered hoarsely. "You and your project would seek to throttle the thing into supine stupor; to make all its powers impotent; to preserve nature as we know it . . . There is another way, T. J.—If the thing were in the proper mind, one that could control it, mine. Just think of the utterly unlimited potency that would be available to that controlling person!"

Mendel's breath was hot and rapid on T. J.'s neck. "Why," the psychiatrist's voice came with mounting hysteria, "I could rule the world unopposed. The riches of a universe would be mine. Not only all the riches that exist—but all I could *dream* into existence! Immortality and godhood would be mine!"

T. J. shook his head and let his shoulders droop as he turned slowly to gaze on the view out the window. A strong wind had risen, combing out the smoke from the fires into streamers of black ribbon. Between the streamers the natural night sky was visible. Familiar stars twinkled in their accustomed places. But, even as he watched, they ceased to be familiar.

Entire groups of stars abandoned

their positions and rushed in confusion across the heavens—some of them becoming lost in the chaos. Many were exploding, running the gamut of colors in the spectrum. When they disappeared, it was into the ultra-violet. And the moon was no longer in existence.

CHAPTER VI

TARL'S brain was numbed as he learned from Marcella and Charles what had happened while he was unconscious. He shook his head dumbfoundedly and muttered, "No! No! No!"

But the hope-seeking exclamations were timed with a series of tremors that rumbled through the earth's crust and shook the automobile on its springs.

"But why?" Tarl asked in horror. "Why is all this happening? What's wrong?"

Marcella glanced at Charles and the chauffeur stared into her eyes.

Tarl witnessed the exchange of glances. "You know!" he said discordantly. "You know!"

He grasped the girl by the shoulders and shook her. "What is it, Marcella? — Tell me what you know!"

His eyebrows knotted as another arrow of pain, somewhat less acute than the last, found its mark. Outside, there was another rumbling—another vicious shaking of the earth's surface.

Charles winced. "Might as well tell him, Marcella. It doesn't make

any difference now. If we can't get to headquarters, he should know about it. If we do get there, he'll find out about it anyway."

Tarl's face was a maze of bewilderment.

"Why aren't we on our way to headquarters now?" the girl looked at Charles.

"We can't take the chance of moving—not until some of that hell outside quiets down."

The night covering the city seemed to have spent its initial fury. The tremors were becoming fewer. But the air itself was a lurking, menacing entity—waiting to pounce and devour.

Tarl's face still showed painful bewilderment. He looked at the chauffeur, then at the girl.

"TARL," Marcella said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You were right. You were being followed—followed every minute—every second. But it was by persons who meant only good! Persons who only intended that you shouldn't be harmed, that you remained out of trouble, that you became wealthy. They provided everything that would make you happy, kept you content . . ."

"Even women?" Tarl brushed her hand off his shoulder. "They even wanted to see I was well supplied with women?"

Keeping her eyes away from his, Marcella said with effort, "Yes."

"And you, Marcella, are you one of them?"

She was silent for an eternity. "Yes, Tarl. I am one of them."

"And I am too, Tarl," said Charles. "Almost everybody you know is."

Tarl clenched his teeth. "They wanted to keep me happy — but why?"

He grasped the girl by her arms and shook her again, shouting: "Why?"

"Cut it out, Tarl," Charles said, still without moving. "She's trying her best."

Tarl relaxed and sank into the cushion, closing his eyes. He wasn't aware of the pain in his head any longer—there was just a vague, dull empty, feeling.

"Tarl," the girl's voice began again, sounding far away. "There were two reasons why you were protected. One was to prevent any physical harm that might separate your intellect from your body, through death . . . The other was to prevent any mental harm — any psychosis, neurosis—that might, in effect, do the same thing.

"You see, Tarl, if that happened, we were afraid that something—something *in* you might break loose." Her body shook with emotion.

"Oh! Charles!" she said, turning to the chauffeur. "How can I tell him? How can you tell anyone without the aid of Dr. Mendel's injection to cover some of the irrationality?"

"Mendel!" Tarl shouted.

"It's this way, Tarl," Charles leaned close to him. "The best scientific minds in the country found out something a little over three years ago. They found out what they called 'the true nature of our world'—of the entire universe . . ."

The chauffeur stared directly into his eyes. "It ain't!" he blurted. "None of it is real! Nothing at all is real—not in any physical sense . . . It's all an illusion! This car. Marcella. That building. This planet. Every star in the sky!"

Tarl laughed, loud and long. But his laughter faded as a group of comet-like objects swished by overhead, chasing one another from the eastern horizon to the west and disappearing beyond a bank of buildings at the end of the street. In their wake, stars eddied—scattered, played in little circles and finally labored to regain their former locations. Terror filled his eyes and he forgot he had laughed.

Then, where one star had shone brilliantly, a section of the heavens went crazy. What had been a star's pinpoint of light expanded into a disc of white luminescence the size of a full moon. The shining area became brighter and continued to grow, slowly. Within seconds, the now huge orb occupied more than half the sky.

It grew until it captured the entire celestial hemisphere, turning night into the most brilliant day he had ever seen. He hid his eyes to protect them. When he looked

again, the intense illumination was gone. The sky was dark again. And he was suddenly aware Marcella was screaming.

She stopped finally. But she did not cry. Her face became sober; rigid. She looked at him. There was horror in her eyes.

"We understand, Charles," she said, staring wildly at Tarl. "But he can't possibly know what it's all about . . . He hasn't been prepared! We've been told what to expect!"

THE girl shivered and placed an arm around Tarl's shoulder. He drew close to her, wanted to bury his face in her breast and cry. But his brain was numb and he was too stunned to ask any more questions.

"Don't ask how they found out that nothing was real," the chauffeur continued. "But they found out. They'll tell you."

"They proved it," the girl's voice rumbled through the wall of her breast into Tarl's ear. "They proved it when they told us that if what they suspected was true, Mercury would be reported mysteriously missing . . . You remember when the planet disappeared, don't you?"

He nodded against the warmth of her body.

"It didn't just leave its orbit or get knocked into the Sun . . . *What's in you* destroyed it. Destroyed it by subconsciously willing it out of existence when you were doped. It was all a test—an experiment."

Tarl raised his head questioningly in front of Marcella's face.

"Yes, Tarl, doped," the girl nodded. "Of course, you don't remember. The memory was wiped out through post-hypnotic suggestion."

The girl sobbed and placed her forehead against his cheek.

"Oh, Tarl!" she cried. "I keep thinking that you're *it*! And I keep wanting to draw away from you. Run! Hide! But you're in the same boat with everyone else. *You* are as imaginary, as unreal as everything else! But it's not you I'm afraid of. It's the *intellect* that shares your body and your mind!"

He sat erect again. Nothing was making sense to him. Nothing at all. He wanted to pinch himself to see whether he was not in some fantastic 'dreamland . . . But a glance outside at the eerie panorama of destruction served the same purpose.

"Tarl," Charles continued. "That *thing*—that *intellect* within you—is the only thing that really exists. Nothing else exists. Not even space. Not even time. Not even matter. Only that *intellect*—that intangible, bodiless power of reasoning—is real! *That and that alone is the universe—the entire universe.* All that is, exists only by virtue of *its* imagination!"

Tarl was staring dully ahead again. He shook his head. "I don't understand. I can't grasp it. I must be going crazy!"

THE lurking quiet outside still flaunted its imponderable threat

and the sky was lighted by the fires which were spreading through the city.

"Our directors," Marcella got control of herself, "believe the entire universe, even you and your *active* mind, is but part of the thought pattern of this—this *intellect*. They believe this entity, over an indefinite period, created everything as we know it now—in an act that was motivated by loneliness . . .

"Possibly it created you first, or one of your ancestors. If it was you first, then it not only created everything as we know it, but it also created a history for the universe and a racial and individual memory for every creature in it.

"If it created one of your ancestors first, then the intellect progressed down the line of descendants until its host body is now you.

"After creation, it enjoyed its universe and its world a while, then lapsed into a state of suspended mental activity. It relegated to its subconscious the task of controlling all the objects and actions of all the beings in its universe."

Tarl shook his head deliberately, trying to absorb the revelation—trying to find the rationality.

"You see," Marcella held his limp hand again. "those who have been following you and their directors believe that only a simple world—a simple universe—was created by the thing while it was in a conscious state.

"They suspect that only in the

subconscious, sleepy stage, did everything become complete . . . Perhaps while it was consciously in control of its creation it created only you—maybe one or two other persons—a small glade as a dwelling place—merely a handful of the simple essentials.

"Then, content and peaceful in satisfaction with itself, it lapsed into a lethargy. While it basked in the slumber of that satisfaction, the intellect extended its creation without conscious effort. The glade became a valley. The valley a continent. The continent a world. Then there came other worlds and stars and stellar systems, and complexities of systematism, order, sciences . . ."

For the first time Tarl's eyes took on a faint glow of partial comprehension. "And," he said, "if it awakes, it can't hold together the complexity of the things it has created!"

The girl nodded.

"But is it awakening? *What's causing it to stir?*"

"Over-caution," Charles shrugged.

"The directors have been stepping on one another's heels," the girl said rapidly. "The suspicion you felt seeped through into your subconscious—into the subconscious of the intellect. The thing was prodded, stung. Not one time, but several times. Each time it was disturbed, an impulse from its subconscious got through into the order it was sustaining. And each time

chaos resulted. Finally, they have almost, if not entirely, awokened it."

"And?" he tried to pull the words from the girl's mouth.

BUT it was Charles who broke the silence. "And this is it! This is the end!"

"No!" the girl protested, holding Tarl's hand tighter. "There's one last chance—if we can get to headquarters. There, the directors may be able to establish contact—appeal to it. Even though we are only temporarily free figments of its imagination, we might be able to appeal sincerely enough to gain our continued existence.

"Of course, we realize that existence can't be what it has been. The entity, if it awakes fully, can't keep the systematic universe together. In order to direct successfully the barest essentials—just a handful of persons and a solid piece of land for them to exist on—the entity must release its grip on everything else. That means practically everything we know will disappear—dematerialize. We can only hope it will listen to our suggestions and try to provide survival for as much and as many as possible."

"Later," Charles added, "after it has succeeded in keeping together as much as it can, it might lapse into profound sleep again. Then progress will once more be on the march. Then the handful of persons will evolve into a civilization.

The small plot of land on which they exist will expand once more into a continent. And there will be stars again—and worlds again."

"And everything will progress normally," the girl said bitterly, "until some scientist discovers the 'true nature of things' and gets worried about locating the 'intellect' and taking steps to assure that it won't return to consciousness."

"But," he asked, "how—how did they know? How did they find out about me?"

Marcella sighed. "That was an accident. A scientist—one associated with the person who is now our Chief Director—perfected a brain wave detector. The instrument also was supposed to have directional properties, to be able to determine the source of the waves it was detecting.

"Only, they found that the indicator never pointed toward the person under test . . . It always pointed in only one direction. They followed the needle halfway across the continent and found—you!"

"But," Tarl asked, "why don't I feel the thing inside? Why don't I realize, now that it's stirring, that it's there?"

"Why should you?" Charles' eyes held only a grim despair. "It's only by accident that the thing is associated with you. Only an accident that in the beginning it created you, or an ancestor of yours, and associated itself with that person for a vicarious enjoyment of the dream-world it had produced. It has act-

ed independent of you and your ancestors all along. It's acted independent of you even during the crisis of the past three years."

"At first," Charles offered, "the directors were only a handful of scientists who discovered the truth. After they had theorized and convinced themselves of what they suspected, they set up the Mercury experiment. The test had two purposes. One was to garner truth. The other was to gather funds for the 'protection' project.

"They conveyed their suspicions, tactfully, to the wealthiest magnates, not only in this country, but throughout the world. The magnates, of course, did not believe them—at first. But, when they predicted the disappearance of a planet, that changed the complexion of things. The directors got all the money they wanted for Operation Fore-stall."

"Charles," the girl looked out the window into the now quiet night, "Don't you think we ought to try to make it to headquarters? It looks calmer out there."

"Yes," the chauffeur opened his door. "We'd better get there before it starts stirring again."

He turned to Tarl, "Only about six blocks to go. We'll have to walk."

HEAT from the miniature volcano on the corner seared their faces as they passed close to it, stumbling through the smoking debris of a

crumpled building. The street down which Charles was leading them was a shambles of accordioned sidewalks, ruptured and spouting water mains, devastated buildings. In each block, fires were gaining in severity and spreading to adjoining buildings.

Noises from nearby residential areas began creeping through the discord of roaring flames and crackling, falling timbers. It beat at their ears and created a frenzy that hastened their footsteps.

Tarl's shoes were scuffed and his trouser legs were torn. The girl's heels had been knocked from her pumps when they passed through the last block of the warehouse district and climbed the embankment, stepping over railroad tracks into a shabby residential section.

Cries of distress from ahead were becoming more audible and he wished he could bar them from his ears.

Walking between Marcella and Charles, Tarl stopped suddenly and stiffened. Then his knees buckled and he almost fell. The girl and his companion caught his arms and held him.

"I'll be all right," he whispered.

The trio remained motionless while Tarl, supported by the other two, fought for his breath against the increasing intensity of the pain. The sounds of anguished humanity up ahead now came streaking to his ears and beat against his brain, striking additional terror within him.

Ignoring the pain, he raised his head and looked forward at the

panorama. A crazed, frantic group of persons was in the street. Some had fallen and were unable to move. Many were dead. Utter devastation enshrouded all. Those who were trying to help the ones on the ground were dazed, mute. Others stood motionless, screaming.

Several laughed hysterically. A number stood trance-like and watched efforts of others to escape burning buildings. There were the cries of a mother looking for her baby—and of a myriad children screaming for their parents. Even animal sounds permeated the uproar. A cat hunched in a corner by a flight of stairs and mewed pitifully. A dog bayed in terror; another yelped in agonized pain.

The sounds thrust themselves into Tarl's conscious and prevented him from slipping into oblivion.

And, while he struggled inwardly, he wondered about the extent of the scene before him. Was it citywide? Nationwide? Worldwide? He closed his eyes again and tried to bar the chaos from his brain.

THEN, suddenly the pain was gone! Entirely and completely gone. Like a chain, it had snapped, leaving him wonderfully free of agony. And he knew, instinctively, the torture would never come back to wrack him.

He knew other things also. That his mind was not entirely his own. That, paradoxically, his mind *was* his own. That he could claim more than the meager mentality he had

up until a second ago possessed. That formerly he had used only a minute particle of his potential intelligence. And that *now* he would have available all of the potential!

Was the intellect fully awake within him? Or was it just beginning to awaken? He decided upon the latter, for the sensation of superintelligence was not a continuous thing. It came and went, remaining only for fleeting seconds to open to his mind vast vistas of supreme knowledge. Then, like a pulsating thing, the sensation was obliterated—only to return again.

And, with the realization of great knowledge came the rapturous awareness of great beauty. For the thing within was intrinsically good. At one crest of the pulsating sensation, he was aware that available for his mental scrutiny was all the knowledge that had ever been learned throughout the temporal extent of creation. At his disposal for inspection was every thought that had ever been born in any intelligence that had lived or was living.

Looming in the mass of universal intellect like an upraised ridge was the malignant thought track of his personal psychiatrist, Mendel. Tarl wondered why the doctor should have been assigned a place so apparently prominent in the mysterious scheme of things. He concentrated on the thought track and started as he realized its connection with the processes that were in play. He realized that Mendel's objective was

to usurp the supreme intelligence. To set up his own mind as the host receptacle. To develop a degree of conscious control. Tarl also saw that consummation of the plan entailed oblivion for himself, the now host for the super intelligence.

He was both alarmed and amused over Mendel's intentions. He was amused because he realized that should the intelligence be awakened sufficiently to make possible a transfer to another host, the awakening would be complete and it would mean the end for all, for the cardinal principal that had motivated the inception of Operation Fore-stall stood out blazingly in his conscious now: The intellect could not possibly hold together on a conscious plane that which it had subconsciously created and was creating while in slumber.

But he wondered suddenly whether the premise could be wrong. Was it possible that the being could awaken completely — destroying in the act all that had been created — only to find that when slumber returned a universal re-creation was effected? A re-creation that reproduced everything as it was before the awakening. With the aid of the hyper-intelligence that was becoming a conscious part of him, he realized that was a very real possibility. It is possible, he mused, for a dreamer to awaken momentarily, then lapse back into slumber and re-enter his dream world, finding it exactly as he had left it.

HE didn't know to what extent his actions and thoughts were now being motivated by his own intelligence and to what extent they were the products of the super intelligence. He wondered whether there actually was a difference between himself and *it*.

Shaking his head to clear away the indecisive thoughts, he announced to the girl and Charles:

"The headache's gone."

He met Marcella's glassy eyes and she screamed. Had she recognized the difference in him?

The question was answered by her eyes. She was staring not at him, but rather past him. He turned and looked up the street.

Then he staggered backward in amazement! The scene was as it had been, at least for a distance of three-hundred feet.

But, beyond that was—*nothing!* *Absolutely nothing!*

It was as though someone had taken a giant cleaver and cut the rest of existence away, leaving on the other side of the cut an unimaginably dark, starless, sightless, soundless void!

Shaking, he whirled around and stared to the rear of them. It was the same in that direction. A block of the scene of devastation. But beyond that *nothing!* He and the girl and Charles were standing on a disc that was located in an infinite void. They were the center of a sphere—a sphere of reality—scarcely more than six-hundred feet

in diameter, with the vast reaches of an unbounded, matterless universe around them.

MARCELLA was still screaming. Charles groaned and sank to the street, limp. He placed his head in his hands and sobbed quietly.

"It's over!" the chauffeur said convulsively. "All over! It's folding up on us! We're all that's left . . . I didn't think it would come this way—this fast. I was sure there would be days of turmoil, chaos. But now it's going. *No stars—no Earth—no Sun—nothing!*"

Marcella fainted and fell against the chauffeur, who brushed her inert form off him. She continued falling to the street. Charles placed his head back in his hands.

Globules of perspiration appeared on Tarl's face. In horror, he perceived something that Marcella and Charles hadn't. The fringe of nothingness was advancing! It was creeping up on them. The small sphere of reality was diminishing—contracting. He realized the void would finally reach in and devour them, as it was now gobbling up matter in the fringe zone. He wanted to turn and run. But when he whirled around, the blackness was just as close and just as frightening in the other direction.

He swept a hand in front of his face, as though to ward off the advancing destruction. And, as if in response to his gesture, it stopped advancing!

He concentrated harder . . . And, slowly, the nothingness retreated, vomiting the stretches of sidewalk, bits of buildings, lengths of street it had devoured. It retreated only a handful of feet. Then a handful more. He was succeeding! He, exercising the power of the entity, was holding on to what was left of the concrete universe!

Marcella and Charles remained motionless. Holding back the void, Tarl cast his eyes into the blackness overhead. He imagined a star located in the center of nothingness. It was there! He imagined another. A second sprang into view!

But the first disappeared!

And, when he returned his eyes to the scene before him, he saw the void had started its advance again, consuming all, as it had before.

He shuddered. He could not hold it together! He could not ward off the dematerialization of matter and, at the same time, order into existence additional matter! Could he prevent his own body from turning into nothing? How long could he hold off? Would the void advance when he fell asleep? How long would it be before he was nothing but a disembodied intellect, existing in the original infinite sea of ether?

Wouldn't it be better, he wondered, if the intellect could be lulled into its lethargy again? Perhaps in that state it could hold on to what was left . . . If only he could get to headquarters! Maybe with the help of the directors, something

could be salvaged.

But headquarters didn't exist any longer! — Or, did it? Maybe it would exist again if he could move this sphere to the spot in the surrounding nothingness that the building had occupied.

CHARLES was still sobbing. Tarl reached down and slapped him on the cheek. The force of the blow jolted the man from his stupor.

"Get up!" Tarl shouted.

"No," Charles whimpered. "Let me alone."

Tarl slapped him again. "Get up! There's still a chance!"

Charles rose listlessly, acting with the unvarying compliance of a schizophrenia. Tarl picked up the girl and cradled her in his arms. She was breathing normally. But she remained unconscious. He took several steps forward. Charles followed. The sphere of reality advanced with them, its perimeter maintaining the same distance from the center, occupied by the trio.

He walked a block, and another block of reality unfolded in front of them—as the block they had just left dematerialized progressively.

"Are we on the street headquarters is located on?" Tarl asked the chauffeur.

"Yes," Charles answered.

Tarl continued along the route. Suddenly he realized the light that enveloped them was unnatural. It wasn't emanating from street lamps and it wasn't born of the sky—for

there was nothing light-giving in the heavens, not even the star he had caused to appear there.

But, even as Tarl consciously reflected on the light's origin, the small sphere was thrust into Stygian blackness! He stifled a scream. Charles didn't. Tarl hurriedly imagined the light had reappeared and it was back again. He commanded it to stay in existence—wondering whether it would.

Seconds later, the advancing boundary between the sphere and the void swept over three persons, recalling them into existence. But, as Tarl became conscious of the fact that they were there, they dematerialized! He tried to bring them back into existence, but realized he could do that only at the expense of a lessening in the size of the sphere. The intellect no longer had the power!

As they continued forward, more tortured individuals slipped under the curtain of reality. Some appeared running from one side of the street to the other. Some were crawling, painfully, across the concrete surface. Some were screaming. And there were some motionless on the ground, the last breath of life escaping from them.

But all, as soon as they found their way back into existence, dematerialized—leaving only cracked sidewalks, split street pavement with an occasional crevice belching forth flame, and buildings, wrecked buildings, crumpled buildings, buildings afire.

He was laboring under the increasing weight of the girl. She began to stir. And the motions made his progress more difficult. He had hoped she would remain unconscious for a while, at least.

Marcella groaned lightly and began to shake her head. He lowered her feet to the street, saw that her eyes were opening. But she closed them hurriedly and swayed lightly.

"You all right, Marcella?" he asked.

She passed a hand over her head and steadied her balance. "I will be in a minute," she whispered.

"Don't look around," he warned, "You won't like what you see."

"I won't," she shuddered. Then she slipped her hand into his and indicated she was ready to go on. They moved off. Charles followed, silently.

They had walked only a few feet when the chauffeur reached out and touched him on the shoulder.

"This is it," Charles pointed to a building on the right.

The girl looked in that direction.

"Headquarters," she said, without emotion.

The building was one of the few in the block still standing. Tarl held the girl's hand tighter and walked toward it.

CHAPTER VII

"**Y**OU don't need the gun any longer," T. J.'s tone was filled with despair as he looked over the barrel at Mendel. "We'll both

be gone within seconds now."

The Chief Director glanced around the empty room. "We're going to disappear again; melt into nothingness—just as we did a little while ago. Why we came back into existence, I don't know. Why the others didn't . . ."

"I'll tell you why," Mendel's eyes dropped some of their frantic quality. "Brent is approaching. He is coming near and bringing with him all that's left of existence. That's the way I figured it would happen."

"But the others didn't come back!"

Mendel placed the gun in his pocket. "Maybe we continue to survive," he laughed emotionlessly, "because we are what you might call 'principal characters' . . . But as long as we're here, in solid form, there's hope."

The psychiatrist paced the floor. "Brent will arrive," the skin drew tight around his mouth. "The time for the transfer is here . . ."

The door groaned open suddenly. T. J. jerked his head up and saw Marcella entering. "Don't come in here!" he shouted. "Keep him out!"

But with the sound of the knob's being turned, Mendel had leaped across the room. And, even as T. J. shouted, the psychiatrist grasped Marcella's wrist and forcibly tugged her into the room, withdrawing the revolver and placing the muzzle into her side.

"Bullets can still kill, Brent, even in this unreal reality," he shouted as

Tarl leaped into the room, fists clenched.

T. J. was shouting a frantic warning. But Tarl was aware only of the subsequent development—Mendel was calmly withdrawing the gun from Marcella's side and placing it in his coat pocket!

Not stopping to seek an explanation for the unexpected action, Tarl leaped forward and extended a clawing hand toward the psychiatrist's throat.

But Mendel thrust Marcella from him and sidestepped numbly as Tarl's clutching arms went flying past. Then the doctor's hand was withdrawn from his pocket and with it came the steel syringe. Even before Tarl had time to recover his balance and face Mendel again, the point of the instrument pressed through his clothing and into his back.

THE effects were instantaneous. Liquid fire raced through his body. And, as he fell, he saw Charles feebly attacking the psychiatrist. But the chauffeur was no match for the much larger man and the doctor's fist hit him like a bludgeon. Tarl saw Charles fall to the floor unconscious as the veil of fuzziness swept over his vision.

T. J. had no time for action, for Mendel had withdrawn the gun from his pocket even before the chauffeur's body had become still. With the weapon, Mendel prodded Marcella and the Chief Director to the opposite side of the room and

returned to where Tarl lay.

"It's time now, Brent!" he whispered, leaning over Tarl. "It can be done now!"

The psychiatrist began examining the other as T. J. spoke with Marcella. Sounds of the conversation floated across the room and beat dully into Tarl's ears. His head turned feebly in that direction, but the outlines of the girl and the man were not clear. He realized, however, that Mendel must have bared his intentions to the Chief Director. And now, Tarl surmised, T. J. must be telling Marcella of Mendel's metamorphosis.

The initial impact of the injection—the physical pain that was effected at first—was beginning to wear off. And now Tarl was aware only of the ponderous mental and physical lethargy that was gripping him.

As the pain left, he became conscious of Mendel's fingers probing his body, feeling his pulse. He felt the doctor's ear pressed to his chest—listening for heartbeat.

Summoning all the energy he could, he brought his arm up over Mendel's head. But, before he could ball the hand into a fist, the arm fell limply to the floor. He tried the action again, but there was not enough strength in his body for even that feeble repetition.

HE faintly heard Marcella scream and managed to twist his head in that direction. Dimly, he saw T. J. had placed her head on his shoulder to hide from her vision the

thing that had caused her outburst.

"It's getting smaller!" the girl's distant, frantic voice almost failed to reach his ears. "Tarl was holding it back for a while. But now he can do nothing!"

A rough hand caught Tarl's chin and twisted his face around. He concentrated intently and brought his vision to focus again.

"Yes, Brent," Mendel's sneering mouth opened and shut convulsively. "It's getting closer. Soon there will be only you and I. And, Brent, you must think—think that whatever is in your mind is a vile thing. Something to get rid of. I am going to help you free yourself of it. I am going to help withdraw it from you . . .

"But you must help me too. You must concentrate as intently as you can: I've got to get rid of it! *I've got to get rid of it!* I'VE GOT TO GET RID OF IT! . . ."

Mendel's voice beat against his ears like a trip hammer and he made an attempt at shaking his head to free himself of the harsh impressions—of the hypnotic incantations. But the relentless voice was unabating.

And, as it continued, he felt the barrel of the revolver press into his temple. The time for Mendel to press the trigger, he sensed, wasn't too far off.

But the psychiatrist's chanting voice swept away all other sensations and Tarl's conscious became submissive, admitting: "*I've got to get rid of it! I don't want it there! I want it to leave!*"

His mental powers were falling in resonance with the psychiatrist's incantations and he was trying eagerly to help accomplish Mendel's purpose.

There were the slightest traces of an indefinable stirring in the back of his mind—deep in his subconscious—even beyond that. The sensation welled and began beating in harmony with his conscious thoughts. Presently the hypnotic phrases were ripping into his mind from two directions—orally from without his body and mentally from within.

But the sensation seemed to be creating an unanticipated fortitude that made it possible for him to resume command of at least one of his sensory faculties. Was that fortitude something which Mendel had not foreseen? Tarl forced the unexpected ergs of energy to his faculty of vision. And objects in the room took on an unclouded definition. The vague outlines of Marcella and T. J. became clearer, sharper.

Even as Tarl surveyed them with as much interest as his drugged mentality would permit, the girl and the Chief Director began to fade from view. Crossing the spot their forms occupied was the edge of the extent of existence. It was sweeping over them! Beyond the pair was the impenetrable void! And, while he looked in horror, Marcella and T. J. became a part of the nothingness and creation continued its inevitable contraction!

"Yes, Brent," Mendel's voice

sounded like thunder in his ear, "when it is narrowed down to you and me—when the entity has but two creatures left in its pitiful universe—there will be but one place for it to go after it leaves your lifeless body."

THREE was an angry rumbling in Tarl's brain and his body winced convulsively. Was the intellect fully aware to the machinations of this foul character it had created? He wondered. Would it be complaisant to Mendel's intentions? If it did occupy Mendel as a host, would there be a place in the subsequent new creation for T. J.? For Marcella? For himself? He was aware he had no reason to believe there would be. For Mendel would certainly object to the existence of anyone who suspected the true nature of reality and could affect it as he, himself, had.

Horror clawed at him through the realization that he and the kind of world with which he was familiar could be no more. Then he suddenly wondered why the entity, which he believed to be basically good, would allow such a thing to come to pass.

A startling half-realization welled in his mentality: Perhaps the entity was not opposing this development only because it was completely indifferent to its creation. But, then, another possibility loomed even larger:

Perhaps the entity was subjective because Tarl himself was sub-

jective! Perhaps the situation actually existed now wherein he and the entity were one and the same!

If such were the case, Tarl rationalized, anything that he, Tarl Brent, imagined would be a reality. The effects of the injection, for instance, could they be obliterated through mentally expressed intent?

Even as Tarl considered the possibility, his body was no longer chained by the drug! His head was clear and his thinking was not confused. In his eyes was the vivid picture of Mendel leaning over him, a stiff arm placed on his chest, the other hand holding the gun.

With a single motion, Tarl twisted his body to one side and leaped to his feet, unbalancing Mendel. A startled expression on his face, the psychiatrist quickly brought the weapon up and aimed it.

Only the beginning of a sensation of fear wormed its way into Tarl's mind. Before the concept materialized, he laughed aloud and glanced intently at the weapon . . .

It was no longer a gun! It was only a limp, wet rag!

Fear spreading across his face, Mendel hurled the cloth to the floor and turned to flee. But the void was only a few feet away and he froze in fear. Tarl advanced upon him.

"It won't work," he said through clenched teeth. "There will be no transfer."

He twisted the man around and pounded a fist into his face. Then another. But Mendel's submission

was premature. And Tarl suddenly realized there was no sense in damaging his knuckles against the psychiatrist's heavy-boned face. The simplest way to deal with the perverted megalomaniac would be to deny his continued existence.

The void swept over Dr. Mendel.

When it began expanding seconds later, the psychiatrist did not reappear. The boundaries of the sphere swept outward, slowly at first. Then at an increasing rate of speed . . .

CONSCIOUSLY directing the creative powers of the super intellect, Tarl welcomed to his brain a conviction that, the crisis ended, the entity would return to its slumber and resume its dream of creation.

How many of the memories of the current period of wakefulness, he wondered, would the intelligence erase?

The sphere of reality expanded further and Charles' unconscious body materialized. Then Marcella and T. J. emerged from the void. Suddenly Marcella was in Tarl's arms, sobbing.

While he held her tight, he was struck with the aspect of the situation, the pregnant possibilities that had appealed to Mendel. The unlimited scope of wealth and power that would accrue to the person who could successfully control the super intelligence on a conscious plane. But, he told himself convincingly, it was better to forget. Forget and let the intellect dream its dreams undisturbed.

"What happened, Tarl?" Marcella backed away from him and turned a quizzical face up to his. "I have an odd impression that something queer has occurred . . . What was it?"

Tarl didn't answer. He glanced at T. J., who was standing limp, a perplexed look on his face. Then Tarl looked out the window. The edge of the sphere was blocks away now and still expanding, at an ever increasing rate. And stars were beginning to shine from the heavens once more.

But something was missing! The scars of the fires that had ravaged the city were no longer visible in the reclaimed extent of creation!

A mysterious veil seemed to spread over Tarl's mind. He wondered why he had thought there should be a panorama of charred, wrecked buildings outside headquarters . . .

That was odd—he had referred to this building as a "headquarters"! A headquarters for what? What had he meant by that?

He shook his head and tried to think more clearly, but he couldn't. There were memories deep in his mind—receding deeper—that would not come out.

He dismissed the attempt at forced concentration and held Marcella close. He felt a great peace from deep within him. The secret was buried from the world—even himself. Somehow, he knew, he had willed it that way.

Marcella kissed him . . .

EPILOG

T. J. RAPPED the table vigorously with his gavel and the murmur of the directors faded. The smiles on their faces, however, remained.

"We all know," the Chief Director was grinning, "the purpose of this final meeting. And I believe, gentlemen, we all unanimously welcome the decision to dissolve Operation Forestall.

"My final report, which I shall read shortly, will restate the initial recommendation that the project be discontinued—the suggestion that was made by me after it was determined that the reintroduction of Marcella Boyland into his life produced the effect we had intended. Within two days after that reintroduction, we not only found the series of scientific refutations had stopped, but also that a process of reversal had begun.

"Received most heartily, of course, were the rediscovery of Mercury and acceptance of the assumption that its disappearance was, in the first place, an erroneous observation. The cloud in space, barely larger than the planet itself and traveling at the same speed and in the same direction, was an acceptable explanation. So acceptable that its rationality was not questioned

on the basis of probability. All the other explanations attending the return to proper functioning of other scientific processes were also accepted.

"I believe our decision that the project was a mistake in the first place was a sound one. We should have no fear of a discontinuance of existence if we diligently avoid any further agitation of the intellect. For that reason, Brent is to be forgotten completely, as far as all of us and each one of us individually are concerned.

"It is regrettable to report the one casualty we have suffered in addition to the agent we had to eliminate at the scene of the fire.

"That other casualty, as you know, was Dr. Mendel. What happened to him, we shall perhaps never know. His disappearance was complete and without a trace. In view of that unexpected happening, we must classify his loss as a casualty.

"The wedding that is occurring this afternoon, three days after Brent and Marcella were brought together, represents the culmination of our work.

"We can thank God everything worked out."

He stared off into space for a moment, and added in an awed tone:

"Yes, we can thank—Tarl Brent."

IMPORTANT!

Special Announcement On Page 162!

INTRODUCING The Author

★ *Daniel F. Galouye* ★

(Concluded from Page 2)

Naturally these extensions of imagination were all of fantastic or pseudo-scientific nature, for I had been introduced to science fiction even before the jackets were worn off my first high school books.

It wasn't long before the "fictionized" news or feature stories began finding their way on paper. Bill Hamling was the victim of the first attempt early last year. Only he knows what he did to deserve it, but he fell prey additionally to the second effort. Even with suggested rewriting, Number Two missed the mark also. Before consigning it to the wastepaper basket, however, I reread it. A speech of one of the characters stood out as though written in Braille: "But under these circumstances how can we be sure anything at all is real?"

That did it! The manuscript joined the trash pile. But the page with the quotation didn't. Like a mushroom, it grew rapidly—into "TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL!" but not without the intervening necessity of a revision after the initial submission).

The fiction writing venture, though, is the completion of a cycle that started with the non-too-tactful

rejection by a science fiction editor (I don't remember whom) of two stories (?) written in 1935, when I was fifteen. Comments on the rejection slips convinced me that if I was going to write it would have to be in the straight news field. That led to a BA in journalism in 1941 at Louisiana State University. Receipt of the degree, however, was delayed a half-year to allow time for satisfaction of a desire to study astronomy, physics, geology and anthropology.

Then there was a brief venture into the newspaper and book editing fields, a tour of duty with the Naval Air Corps as cadet, flight instructor, test pilot and transport pilot in the Pacific, return to New Orleans, wedding bells, reassimilation into the newspaper profession and the addition of two little distractions named Denise and Jeanne.

With the cycle completed I'm smugly content. If you enjoy reading about Tarl Brent only partly as much as I enjoyed writing about him, I shall feel satisfied with the possibility that you'll invite me back to the pages of IMAGINATION.

— *Daniel F. Galouye*





HIDEOUT

By
Fox B. Holden

When a man has a price on his head he runs for his life. And if he's finally cornered he may have only one door left open to him—Time!

“CAP’N Cutlass! Earth merchantman three points starboard, oblique ecliptic eight degrees. Estimate speed 400,000, Marsbound. Your orders, sir?”

Robbin Cutlass was angry. He wouldn’t let this one go by. Not even with a million credits on his head. But damn it, one ship and one crew couldn’t fight the whole Tri-Planet Entente Space Patrol alone. But that was how it had to be.

“Track her down!” He switched over to all-stations. “All hands read this. Gunners to stations, oblique ecliptic eight, Earth reading three starboard, two torpedoes across her bow and stand alert to blow her! Boarders don your suits, man lock stations and stand by. Drive room cut in your Raven converters, jet minus 177 ecliptic acute 3-5-2 and hold her steady as she blasts. Now wait.”

He checked in his own radar screen as a matter of routine.

Twenty years ago when his father had given orders from this same control room things hadn't been like this. You knew, when the *Vulture* and a section of her fleet closed in to make the kill that nobody had the guts to try to stop you. Sure, Jeremy Cutlass had been a tough old duck—but even he wouldn't have been able to hold the fifty-ship buccaneer fleet together after the Patrol had gotten fully organized. Robbin remembered how it had been when he died—the whole fleet had hovered in double-echelon to each side of the *Vulture*, the faded sun-glow from Pluto glimmering shadow-like from its long, slender hulls—right at the very edge of the total darkness of Deep Space itself. And then the body of Jeremy Cutlass had been committed to the deep of Infinity.

Those were the days when a man had friends—and now, all that Jeremy Cutlass had had, scattered as they'd been from one end of the Universe to the other—were either dead or sweating out their last days in the penal colonies of Earth or Mars. All except for old Doc Raven—and he'd be under lock and key too if the *Vulture* hadn't been able to carry out Jeremy's dying command—to rescue him from the penal colony of Mars, regardless of the cost. The cost had been the last eleven ships of the fleet.

It had been worth it, yes. Not just because the conniving old toad was probably the best scientist Mars

had ever produced, but because—

THE intercom squealed frantical-
ly even as Cutlass saw what was happening in his own screen.

"Cap'n Cutlass! It's a trap, sir! I'm tracking Patrol ships from all points—"

There were at least 200 of them.

Even the Raven drive couldn't keep the *Vulture* from slewing, losing some of her precious speed as Cutlass tapped out an unprecedented ecliptic-deviation and trajectory-variation pattern on the master control console.

A screen generator whined its overload as the Patrol ships got the *Vulture's* range and pounded her with everything they had. This time, they were too many—and too fast.

"Run!" Cutlass howled to the drive-room. "Godammit, run!"

His eyes were hot and wet with the rage that rasped in his voice. No Cutlass that had ever buccaneered Space for four generations had ever given that command. But now the notorious *Vulture*, last of her kind in the Solar System, finally was forced to take to her jets or be torpedoed to cosmic dust like all the rest.

Two screen generators went to hell and plastered the control room with jagged shards of smoking metal. There was a searing pain in Cutlass' shoulder, and blood trickled the length of his arm and along his fingers as he flipped the ship's inter-teleco switches. Just a glance told

him they'd gotten through the screens—the jagged, gaping holes in the *Vulture's* ripped flanks told him he didn't have a gunner or a radar-man left alive.

Damn them *damn them . . .*

He choked on the acrid fumes of the burnt-out screen generators as he fumbled painfully into a space-suit. Old Doc had bragged to him once that a man could travel the system end to end and back in a Raven-built suit—with a certain amount of pirates' luck, of course. Well, the Patrol wasn't to have Robbin Cutlass alive—

He was less than five thousand miles out when he saw the *Vulture* die. It was a Viking's death—a great mass of blinding white flame which seemed to rip Space wide open for a silent, coruscating second—and then there was the cold darkness of any grave.

Pluto glimmered eerily a hundred million miles ahead of him. And somewhere, a half-light-year beyond, was Doc's old freighter. Doc, with his well hidden laboratory, circling away the last years of his life in the quiet solitude of Deep Space—all that was left.

* * *

BARREL-chested and heavy-browed like his father, Robbin Cutlass stood there, his space-suit crumpled in a heap at his feet, and looked about him. Doc had explained it to him, but he still was not sure he understood.

This was the freighter—or, more accurately, Doc Raven's great laboratory, suspension-built in the long, tapering mid-section of the battered, engineless ship which drifted silently in its dark, remote path around a pale sun. Only a scant five years ago Doc had been brought here following his costly Martian rescue, yet his equipment, which had been salvaged from a half-dozen hidden sanctuaries on as many different planets and brought here for him to assemble, had in that time grown to twice its original bulk. Sometimes Robbin thought of Doc as something less of a scientist and more of a wizard. It was often said, in the deadly seriousness that marked the spaceman's legends, that there is more to the Martian mind than a man of Earth might even dream of.

The long banks of control consoles emitted a blue-green glow of their own, silhouetting as they did the rows of relays, grid-circuits and reactor-registers.

Robbin did not know the little Martian scientist's source of power—but he knew that through this Colossus of engineering enough must pour to change the very courses of the planets in their paths, if Doc should will it.

His eyes turned back for a second time to the metal cylinder, gleaming dully in the blue-green light of the consoles, which stood more than half the height of the long, narrow lab itself. Except that it was twice as high and a little more than twice

the diameter it looked like nothing more complex than an old-fashioned hot-water heater. Yet through it, the bent old man had said, flowed the raw flux of space-time, tapped from the fabric of the Universe itself.

"I'm not the guy for this job, Doc. You want somebody who's a scientific explorer or something. Right now, I've got to heist a new ship from someplace. I must be as hot as a two-credit rocket."

THE echoes of his heavy voice were distorted strangely, and came back to him in half-sounds and whispers that had a hollowness of words that were spoken and had died a thousand years ago.

"It wouldn't work, Robbin boy. The day of the *Vulture* and her great legion is over," the old Martian said softly. The years in the penal colony had taken their toll, but his face still showed the intelligence that had once come close to conquering three worlds. "I could get you your ship within an hour with this—" he gestured toward the dully-glinting cylinder, "just as I plucked you from Space. But—in one other ship or with a fleet of one hundred, they'd have you by tomorrow or in a year from tomorrow. You've got to hide, Robbin. Believe an old man . . . if I could devise an armor or a drive or a screen generator that would hide you from their tracks and torpedoes for the rest of your rebellious life I'd be at work on them

this instant. But there is only one place left that I can hide you now—only one realm that they have not yet conquered. I grow old, Robbin, and they are catching up—"

"You said you could hide me in—in Time, I guess you said. I don't know what you mean, Doc. You could tell me about space-warp and time-continua and all that for the next ten years, and—"

"Space-time is like the very fabric of your tunic, Robbin." The answer came with the hint of a new excitement. "A set of slender threads in myriad numbers running in two dimensions, and another set running at right angles in another two. If they are the fabric of space-time, they comprise four simple dimensions—length and width, depth and time. You are—how tall? Six feet three inches. And, eleven inches through the chest, perhaps. Across the shoulders you measure twenty-three inches. And—you are thirty-three years old. Is that so difficult?"

"That's not a new theory, Doc. That's been in the books for a hell of awhile."

"Of course, Robbin. But—I have learned to *separate the threads!*"

"Doc, you old madman, talk sense! Not that I don't appreciate what you did. I do. They had a track on me before I was half way to Pluto. But you had your eye on me as always—"

"I owed you and your father that, boy. No man soon forgets the col-

ony."

"I know. And I realize that somehow you were able to use this hot-water tank here to pluck me out of Space—warp me from there to here, or whatever it is you said you did. Believe me I'm grateful. But this space-time stuff I don't understand. All I know is that there's a million-credit price on my head, and everywhere I look there's the Patrol. Everywhere. In a new ship, I could cruise Deep Space for awhile until I cooled off—"

"When has a Cutlass ever cooled off, Robbin? As long as they have not seen you die with their own eyes . . ."

ROBBIN put a cigarette to his lips, smoked quietly for minutes. The little man seated behind the most fantastic master-control panel he had ever seen remained silent, waiting, expectant.

"You really want me to give it a try, don't you, Doc?"

The old man's eyes glittered, and Robbin knew it was all the answer that he'd get. What the hell. If it worked—maybe, back sometime else—

"You're really pretty sure of this thing, ain't you, Doc?"

Wordlessly, the old Martian rose from his bench, pressed a stud on the side of a bulky automatic cataloguing file. He returned with several objects that Robbin could only identify from his memory of the history tapes he'd studied as a boy.

"I could say you've been caper-

ing in museums, Doc, but I guess I know better . . ." He turned the objects around in his hands. A 19th century Colt revolver. An ornate dagger from perhaps the scabbard of a Spanish nobleman who had lived and died a thousand years ago. A book of names and numbers—MANHATTAN TELEPHONE DIRECTORY—1967 was printed on its cover.

"I warped Space to effect your rescue, Robbin. I can warp Time to hide you. The Patrol is growing in efficiency and in sheer numbers—there's no hiding place for you in Space, lad. None. Not even—here."

Cutlass knew he was right. If they found him here, it'd be the colony again for Doc. He owed him too much, for his father as well as himself, to let that happen. And anywhere else, sooner or later—

"I guess you win, Doc. But I've still got questions. I step into the cylinder—and then where'll I be? What'll I be? Suppose I don't like it where I end up? I'm sick of the sight of space police—or any other kind of police."

"I'll place you on Earth, because you're native to it, Robbin, and have a knowledge of its history. And—I'll try to pick a time that suits a young fellow of your talents! And if you don't like it, you have only to use this—"

CUTLASS fingered the small object, was fascinated as it glittered with all the blended colors of

the sun despite the blue-green shadows that fell everywhere about it. It was the shape and size of an old-fashioned cigarette-lighter, and made of some hard, smooth metal that doubtless was of Doc's own forging. The only break in its smooth surface was a round, countersunk button colored like a ruby.

"No matter where you find yourself in Space or Time," he heard Doc saying, "press the button—hold it down hard. And I'll know you're either bored or—" the withered old face smiled gently, "in trouble that you can't battle your way out of! I'll have you in another space-time within seconds."

"You're a crazy old coot, Doc. You know that."

"Don't you think it, boy! And there is no need to fear my—my death, in the interim. Depending upon the time-phase in which you find yourself, anywhere from ten to a hundred years in your continuum will mean perhaps a minute to an hour in mine. But—as to what you'd be—well . . ."

"Go ahead! Tell me," Cutlass laughed. "As long as I'll be alive!"

"It is actually impossible for me to answer you. I don't think I can change the blood in a man's veins. And the blood of pirates has coursed in yours through generations!"

Cutlass laughed loudly, and it was a defiant, careless laugh that told the Universe and its entire white picket-fence society to go to blazing Hell.

"OK, Doc! You win! You hide me good!"

Cutlass belted the small signalling device around his body and stepped inside the cylinder. The dull black sheen of his tunic lent a peculiar matter-of-factness to the underacted drama, yet Cutlass knew it was as Doc said—hide out, or die.

"Good hunting, Robbin Cutlass!"

* * *

A half-light-year beyond Pluto, floating at the edge of Deep Space in a creaking freighter hull that was disguised with the shades of night itself, a withered Martian scientist touched a series of relays with his short, reddish fingers. There was a gentle humming, the faint odor of ozone, and that was all. Robbin Cutlass, last of the Space buccaneers, had vanished completely.

* * *

A hot wind rushed across his face and there was the taste of salt on his lips. His head hurt as though he had been struck; how they had come upon the French merchant was puzzlingly hazy in his mind, but there was no doubt in it as to what course of action to take.

"Two shots from your long-gun across her bow, Mr. Treach!"

Cutlass glanced briefly upward as his colors were raised quickly to the tip of the spanker-gaff; then he watched with satisfaction as the captain of the merchantman laid his mainyard aback and hove to.

In a moment he could lower a

boat, and this time there'd better be something more aboard to his liking than a cargo of salt! If it were coffee that he could sell at Rio Medias, he would not sink her, and if it were gold, he'd spare her captain's life.

Cutlass had parted his lips to shout an order to lower a boat when he stopped his voice in his throat. He could not remember ever having given chase after sail but what the fleeing prize, upon sighting his black flag, would simply heave-to and surrender. But a hint of screened movement at the edge of the merchantman's middle deck had caught the corner of his eye—

"The Frenchman feigns surrender when his intention is to scuttle us!" Cutlass howled. "Mister Treach! Prepare a fitting answer to such an ill-planned deceit!"

"Aye sir!"

Cutlass watched his men as they scrambled to obey the first mate's order and brought their cannon to bear for a broadside. Some with laughs on their lips, all with sweat glistening from their scarred bodies, the gunners of the *Black Talon* grasped the lanyards of their already-shotted guns even as the Frenchman opened fire.

"Sink the lily-livered swine!" Cutlass bellowed, and drew his sword to flash it down in a glittering arc as the signal to fire. Half his starboard battery flamed in response to the merchantman's unsuccessful stratagem, then the other half as

the first was reshotted. A ball from the Frenchman's battery tore away the brig's fore top gallantsail but Cutlass was warming to the fray and flashed the sword again in the burning rays of the hot West Indies sun.

"The Frenchman shall strike his colors, Mr. Treach, and I'll shoot the man who fights as anything less than a devil!" he roared, a great laugh forming in his throat as the merchantman's volleys became increasingly ragged and her planking began to fly in splinters from beneath the very feet of her crew.

For the Frenchman's cargo, whatever it was, Cutlass knew he cared but little. The *Talon*'s hold must be full to overflowing with jewels pillaged from the galleys of the Great Mogul—hard specie from the hulls of the East Indiamen—no, the plunder was for the satisfaction of the crew. But this—this pure taste of revenge was for Robbin Cutlass!

SOMETHING stirred peculiarly in his mind — something that for the moment caught his breath from his lungs and left him shivering, then sent the blood racing hot through his body. There was an anger there — a long-smouldering anger for which he could not accurately account, but which was undeniable. His sword flashed again in the blaze of the sun.

And once more he shivered.

"Cap'n Cutlass sir! It's a trap!"

His palm was suddenly cold and slippery on the corded hilt of the

glittering blade in his hand.

"Sail ho! Sail to stern sir!" the lookout was bellowing. "Three o' the King's men-o'-war!"

Cutlass watched them as they bore down, shouted orders to the helmsman to bring the brig about. The cries of the drowning merchantman's crew were totally wasted on him as he prepared to meet the new menace. Ordinarily, so far as his hazy memory would account for him, there had never been much to fear from the Jamaica fleet. Now it seemed they had been especially enjoined in the Frenchman's aid for the sole purpose of taking his head for the 500-pound reward on it. Or perhaps the British King had added a couple of hundred — because for less, who was there who would dare bring the attack to Robbin Cutlass?

The men-of-war, under a smart press of canvas and now within cannon range, were already lowering boats.

"Mister Treach bring your muskets to bear!"

"Aye, sir and the guns are reshotted!"

"Keep your fire until I give the order to loose it, Mr. Treach! And strike the black flag — you shall hoist American colors in its place. We mistook the Frenchman for a Spaniard, d'ye hear?"

CUTLASS knew as he gave the order that the strategy was far too thin, but it would give heart to

the crew until the English swarmed over the side. Had he kept his witless anger and secured the merchantman and her guns rather than sunk her . . . But it was too late to correct the error now — and if this were a premeditated trap, then the English were tardy, and had permitted their decoy to pay too high a price.

There was the crack of musketry as the crew of the *Talon* fought to turn the boats' advance, but it was answered with vicious accuracy from the decks of the men-of-war themselves. Then one of the King's ships tacked about, bringing her cannon to bear while her sister ships bore down on the brig.

The *Talon*'s broadside was simultaneous with that of the gun-boat, but it was a matter of 40 guns to twelve. And even as the main top gallant mast was sheared and came tumbling crazily through the brig's already sagging top-rigging, the British war vessels had come alongside to both starboard and port.

"All hands repel boarders!" Cutlass thundered, and armed his left hand with one of the pistols from the brace suspended bandolier-like from his neck.

They were too many. Because of the nearness of her sisters, the cannonading ship had ceased firing and had brought about to join the boarding fight; and there could be no running. He, Cutlass, had never given the order to —

He shook his head. This had happened before. Somehow it had happened before and yet of course that was impossible. It was his rage at the English and their price upon him that was addling his thoughts.

And with half her rigging torn asunder, the *Talon*, a sorry sight now, could not run her own length.

In seconds the *Talon*'s decks were slippery with blood from poop to forecastle; Cutlass drew and fired his pistols with his left hand as he crossed swords with his right — three of his attackers went down howling in agony, and the swordsman he had killed outright with a ball in the face had been replaced by two more.

"We've come for your head, Robbin Cutlass!"

"Then you'll parry this to get it!" Cutlass gritted savagely. The Englishman was a split-second late, and the corsair's sword split his throat from chin to collar-bone.

But they were too many. *Was it to be ever so?*

Desperately, blood coursing from a reopened old wound in his left shoulder which for some reason had never healed completely, Cutlass groped for the last of his pistols. His clawing fingers slipped on something hard at his waist. He must — must —

Press it!

* * *

Far away, in another Space and in another Time, an old man's eyes

glittered. There was the signal, but the chances were that young Robbin Cutlass hadn't given it from sheer boredom! Swiftly, his short, thick fingers flicked the breadth of a time-warp quadrant, altered the mass and continuum ratios as great banks of machinery seemed to float in their own blue-green glow and throbbed with the mighty power of the Sun itself.

But it was true, there were some things even science could not change.

...

HIS head hurt.

The Kid and Gonzales rode at a walk beside him, and the Kid was complaining about the heat again. Gonzales told him to shut up unless he could think of a better way to make a living.

Cutlass gestured with a nod of his head.

"Up there," he said.

The trio reined off the bend of the road and almost at a leisurely pace wended their way up the gentle rise of a hill a scant 50 yards distant.

"They ain't many trees," the Kid grumbled.

"Ain't gotta be," Cutlass said. "I steer you wrong yet?"

"Reckon not."

"Then button up and listen." Idly, he stretched out his right arm, half-leaned from his saddle, and plucked the square of weather-beaten paper from the trunk of a scrubby cottonwood. "Long as y'do what

I say, you'll keep seein' these. Soon's you stop, they won't have to be printin' no more."

"They raise the price a leetle," Gonzales said. "But they still don't draw our peectures worth a damn!"

The rust-stained leaflet said that dead or alive, the person of one R. Cutlass, gambler, desperado, and stage robber, would bring the capturer the sum of \$5,000 reward in gold. An additional \$1,000 would be paid the capturer for either of his henchmen alive, \$500 dead.

"How soon's it due?" the Kid asked. He brushed sweat from his forehead and from the inside band of his Stetson, and loosened each of his new Colts in their holsters.

Cutlass didn't answer, but he pulled a gold watch from his pocket and studied it for a moment. He wondered what name the initials engraved inside its case stood for, gave the stem a twist and replaced it.

"That's the best wan you ever get, eh boss?"

"OK, Chico. You get started. And keep those guns where they belong until the Kid an' me draw ours, savvy? Last time you got that greasy trigger finger of yours in an itch an' we had t'go killin' t'get the stuff. Law in these parts ain't about to forget the racket of six-guns when they hear it, and I ain't of a mood for runnin' to hide again."

CUTLASS crumpled the reward poster and threw it from him.

It was getting so in the whole state of Texas you couldn't draw a breath but what the law heard you and came tossing lead. Some said a kid named Bonny got a kick out of seeing his pictures strewn all over the landscape. Maybe. But it made Cutlass boil inside.

Gonzales was on his way back to the long bend in the road. Cutlass watched him detachedly as he turned his bronc loose, then sprawled full length and face down in the road so the Wells Fargo drivers couldn't miss him. The big splotch of red paint on the back of his shirt was visible even from where Cutlass and the Kid waited.

The Kid shifted uneasily in his saddle.

"Relax," Cutlass said. "Five minutes maybe. That ain't long to sweat."

Five minutes for a Dallas to Fort Worth payroll shipment that was supposed to be worth a hundred thousand. Travelling just like any other stage, if you could believe Toady. So as not to draw attention: Just two drivers, a couple of rifles, and maybe two or three regular passengers.

Hell. Gonzales and the Kid could have the hundred thousand. He had his pile. Robbin' Cutlass couldn't remember where the rest of it had come from exactly — the watch with the initials that weren't his had puzzled him some. But he knew more by instinct than by memory how

he'd got it, and that he had plenty more junk like it stached in a bank safe-deposit box in — yeah, Abilene, what the hell was the matter with him.

Sure, he had his pile. Buf it makes a man sore as hell when all the tin badges in Texas gang together just to hunt him down like a coyote and then hold up his hide for every gawk to hoot at. Who the hell did they think they were to give Robbin Cutlass any back-talk? When the Wells Fargo rig slowed up to have a look at Chico, noise or no noise, by God . . .

The Kid heard it when he did, took his hands from his moist gun butts in a play at nonchalance and adjusted the black kerchief over his thin nose.

Cutlass didn't say anything until the stage had come tearing hell for leather around the long bend, started spouting little plumes of dust from under its iron-rimmed wheels as it ground to a halt. One of the drivers started getting down.

"OK," Cutlass said.

ONLY it wasn't OK. Even before they'd covered half the fifty yards, Cutlass saw the driver who had gotten down to go over for a look at Chico pull out his Colt and deliberately gunwhip the possum-playing Mexican across the head. Then he flopped flat on his belly and the doors of the stage slammed open even as the other driver was

dropping from his perch, Winchester coming up as his boots slammed dust from the road.

Two full squads of U.S. cavalry were firing even before the Kid had been able to get his guns out. He went down with five holes in him before he could cry out. Cutlass was already out of his saddle and choking on sand. Before his first Colt was empty three soldiers and one of the drivers were dead.

But they were too damn many—

Cutlass cursed through the dust in his teeth and lunged for the Winchester still holstered on his pony's flank. The animal screamed as a slug tore through one of its legs but Cutlass had half emptied the Winchester's clip before the big corporal had got a slug through the pony's head and put it out of its misery.

There were two quick pains in his right arm, so he had to aim and fire the rifle with his left, pump the best he could with his right. There wasn't any getting away.

"Yer all through, Cutlass! Stand up and toss yer guns down or we'll save the state the cost of a trial!"

"Start savin,' blue-coat!"

Cutlass groped at his belt to claw another handful of cartridges from it. His bleeding fingers felt a hard, square object. Something stirred somewhere deep inside his boiling brain. He was supposed to—*press it!*

* * *

Far away, in another Space and

in another Time, a smile spread slowly across an old man's wrinkled face. No, you couldn't change the blood in a man's veins! But perhaps —

Swiftly, his short thumby fingers played over a row of relays . . .

CUTLASS swallowed the aspirin, picked up his brief-case and met his man in the spacious lobby.

"Sorry to've kept you waiting, Prescott! Hope you didn't have a late deadline to make?"

"No, sir, that's quite all right. Believe me, I'm pleased to have an opportunity for an interview with you at any time of day or night! You've made the best copy coming out of this town in many a column, sir!"

"Well, thank you, Mr. Prescott. I believe in speaking freely to the press —"

"I've a cab waiting right outside, sir."

"Suppose we take my car? A little more privacy, I think —"

Prescott followed the immaculately attired Cutlass through the Statler's front doors to the sleek black limousine waiting at the curb. Its engine was idled to an inaudible purr, and the tonneau door was opened by a uniformed chauffeur as they approached. Cutlass nodded politely to a couple of alert Secret Service men. The Law. Friends now, of course.

Within soundless seconds the lux-

urious vehicle had pulled into Washington traffic, and it was Cutlass who opened the conversation.

"I thought perhaps you could better obtain what you'd like in somewhat more pleasant surroundings, Mr. Prescott. I've a little place just outside the city — prefer it, I assure you, to the Embassy room!" They both laughed, Prescott a little self-consciously, wondering just what kind of a write-up Cutlass was expecting. As if he didn't know . . .

"Well sir, if I could get a little background to what happened on the floor this morning, before I attempt to go into too much detail . . . Your new tax bill — I understand there was rather, well — some rather spirited opposition this morning —"

Cutlass laughed easily. "To be expected, Mr. Prescott. They thought my last one was too muc*l* to take, but it went through! As this one shall. I can assure you of that."

"I see." Prescott made a brief notation. "What reaction do you expect from the corporations? If, that is, the President —"

"Oh, they've a powerful lobby of course. But, my boy—and of course this is off the record — it's simply a matter of putting the pressu—er. persuasion in the right places. The corporations will — I think they'll come around all right."

Prescott added to his notes.

"Is this new tax bill, Senator, to be your last for this session, or do you contemplate —"

Cutlass' chuckle was as velvety as the silent roll of the limousine's white-walled tires.

"My dear young man," he murmured, "I can't answer that question for the record. It depends to such a large extent on the many — rather personal considerations involved. But of course for a political reporter that

should hardly be news."

Mentally, Prescott ground his teeth. "*No, it's never been news, Senator,*" he raged silently. "*You—you goddamned old pirate!*"

In another Space, in another Time, an old man waited for a third signal.

But it never came.

* * *

LAMP SHADE FOR A-BOMBS!

THE Senior Raid Warden pauses and raises his hand. The masked, rubber-suited rescue team comes to a halt. The S.R.W. surveys the tangled jungle of ruins in which he stands. His Geiger clicks furiously and he's hesitant. The Bomb has fallen not ten minutes ago and the team is trying to mark the limits of absolute safety.

One of the figures says through his muffling mouthpiece: "Hey, Chief, there's a lampshade!" Without waiting for a reply he runs over and picks up a small metal cylinder slightly burnt and blackened and hands it to the S.R.W. The S.R.W. studies the metal can closely. He shrugs: "O.K." he says and beckons his men on, "we've got another two hundred yards to go . . ."

That could be, for if the A-Bombs ever fall, trained rescue - workers teams will immediately set out to determine the safe limits of the explosion, will isolate those regions within a certain radius of "ground zero" — the point directly beneath the explosion of the A-Bomb.

And one of the major tools that will be used is the ingenious "radiation lampshade", little more than a white-painted cylinder of sheet met-

al not very different from an ordinary tin-can except that inscribed on it will be a grid of lines and some numbering. A trained technician can read the exact point at which the bomb fell by studying the grid-lines and the way they outline the burnt and blackened portions of the can!

This simple and effective "bomb-recorder" depends upon the fact that before the physical explosion wave front of the A-Bomb reaches out, it is preceded by a ferocious blast of heat radiation which can mark a pattern and burn in its origin on almost any substance. This was discovered at Hiroshima when people had the pattern of their clothing burnt into their skin and wires and telephone poles had their shadows traced in burnt concrete.

By orienting the white-painted cans and distributing them throughout a city, an exact record can be made of the A-Bomb's explosion, and so the danger area can be clearly marked, beyond which rescue teams will not venture, knowing that nothing but death lies within that wasted area. The "radiation lampshade" is not a pretty device to contemplate — but someday it may be a lifesaver.

* * *

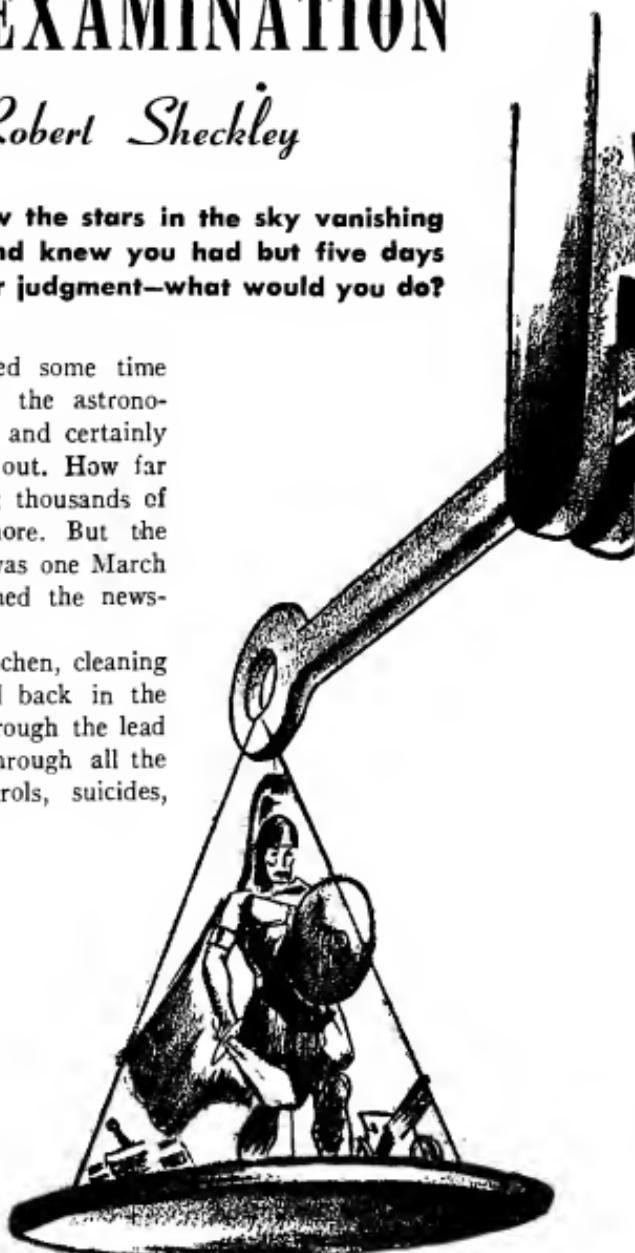
FINAL EXAMINATION

By Robert Sheckley

If you saw the stars in the sky vanishing by the millions, and knew you had but five days to prepare for your judgment—what would you do?

I suppose it started some time back, even before the astronomers discovered it, and certainly long before I found out. How far back I have no idea; thousands of years, perhaps, or more. But the first I knew about it was one March evening, when I opened the newspaper.

Jane was in the kitchen, cleaning up, and I was settled back in the easy chair, reading through the lead articles. I skimmed through all the war talk, price controls, suicides,





murders, and then glanced through the rest of the paper. One small article in the back caught my eye.

ASTRONOMERS LOSING STARS, the caption read. It was a human-interest story I suppose, be-

cause it went on in that maddening coy style the newspapers use for that sort of stuff.

"Dr. Wilhelm Mentzner, at the Mount St. James Observatory, says that he has been unable, in recent

weeks, to find some of the Milky Way stars. It would seem, Dr. Mentzner tells us, that they have vanished. Repeated photographs of certain portions of space do not show the presence of these dim, faraway stars. They were in place and intact in photographs made as recently as April, 1942, and . . . ”

The article gave the names of some of the stars—they didn't mean a thing to me—and chided the scientists on their absentmindedness. “Imagine,” it went on, “Losing something as big as a star. Although,” the writer summed up, “it doesn't really matter. They have a few hundred billion left to play around with.”

I thought it was sort of cute at the time, although in questionable taste. I don't know a thing about science—I'm in the dress line—but I've always looked upon it with the greatest respect. The way I see it, you start laughing at scientists and they come up with something like the atom bomb. Better to treat them with a little respect.

I can't remember if I showed the article to my wife. If I did, she didn't say anything in particular.

Life went along as usual. I went to work in Manhattan and came home to Queens. In a few days there was another article. This one was written by a Phd., and it had dropped the kidding style.

It said that stars appeared to be disappearing from our Milky Way

galaxy at a tremendous rate. Observatories in both hemispheres had estimated that a few million of the farthest stars had vanished in the past five weeks.

I stepped out the backdoor to have a look. Everything seemed in order to me. The Milky Way was still up there, smeared across the sky as thick as ever. The Big Dipper was shining away, and the North Star was still pointing toward Westchester. No difference. The ground was frozen under my feet, but the air was almost warm. Spring would be coming along soon, and Spring fashions.

In the distance I could see the red glow of Manhattan, across the 59th Street Bridge. That seemed to settle it. The only problem I had was dresses, and I went back inside to worry about them.

In a few more days the star-story had reached the front page. STARS DISAPPEARING, the headlines read. WHAT NEXT?

It seemed that millions of stars were vanishing from the Milky Way every day and night. The other galaxies seemed to be unaffected, although it was hard to tell; but they were definitely dropping out of ours. Most of them were so far away they could only be caught with a high-powered telescope, or a camera; but hundreds could still be seen disappearing by anybody with a pair of eyes. Not blowing up or fading out;

just click—and they were gone.

This article—written by an astronomer *and* a Phd.—reminded everybody that only the light was stopping. The stars themselves must have been snubbed out hundreds of millions of years ago, and that the light was finally stopping, after travelling all that distance across space: I think it was hundreds of millions, although it might have been thousands.

The article didn't even speculate on the cause of it all.

I went star-gazing that night. Everyone else in the neighborhood was out in their backyards, too. And sure enough, in the gigantic spread of stars I could see little specks of light winking out. They were barely noticeable; if I hadn't been looking for them I would never have seen anything different.

"Hey Jane," I called in the back door. "Come on out and have a look."

My wife came out and stood, hands on hips, looking at the sky. She was frowning, as though she resented the whole business.

"I don't see anything," she said.

"Look carefully," I said. "Watch one section at a time. There was one! Did you see it?"

"No."

"Watch for little winks," I said. But it wasn't until the Thomas kid came from next door and loaned her his telescope that she saw it.

"Here, Mrs. Osterson, use this," the kid said. He had three or four

telescopes in his hands, a pair of binoculars, and a handful of charts. Quite a kid.

"You too, Mr. Osterson," he said.

Through the telescope I could really see it. One moment a pinpoint of light would be there, and then —bing! It was gone. It was downright weird. For the first time I started getting worried.

It didn't bother Jane, though. She went back into her kitchen.

Of course, even with the galaxy collapsing, the dress business had to go on, but I found myself buying a newspaper four or five times a day and keeping the radio on in the store to find out what was going on. Everybody else was doing the same. People were even arguing about it on street corners.

The newspapers had about a thousand different theories. There were scientific articles on the red shift, and intergalactic dust; there were articles on stellar evolution and visual hallucination; the psychologists were trying to prove that the stars hadn't been there in the first place, or something like that.

I didn't know what to believe. The only article that made any sense to me was one written by a social commentator, and he wasn't even a full-fledged scientist. He said it looked as if someone was doing a big job of housecleaning in our galaxy.

The Thomas kid had his own theories. He was sure it was the work

of invaders from another dimension. He told me they were sucking our galaxy into theirs, which was in another dimension, like dust into a vacuum cleaner.

"It's perfectly clear, Mr. Oster-
sen," he told me one evening after
work. "They've started sucking in
the outside stars at the other side
of the Milky Way, and they're work-
ing through the centre. They'll reach
us last, because we're at the far
end."

"Well . . ." I said.

"After all," he told me, "*Aston-
ishing Yarns* and *Weird Science Stor-
ies* practically agree on it, and they're
the leaders in the sci-fi field."

"But they're not scientists," I
said.

"That doesn't matter," the kid
told me. "They predicted the sub-
marine before there was one. They
predicted airplanes when scientists
were saying the bumblebee couldn't
fly. And rockets and radar and atom
bombs. They've got the truth about
this too."

He paused for breath. "Some-
one's gotta stop the invaders," he
went on in a tone of utter conviction.
He looked at me sharply.
"You know, since they're dimension-
changers, they can take the appear-
ance of humans." Again he looked
at me, suspiciously.

"Anyone might be one. *You* might
be one."

I could see he was getting nervous,
and maybe on the verge of handing

me over to some committee or other,
so I fed him milk and cake. That
just made him more suspicious, but
there wasn't anything I could do
about it.

The newspapers took up the sci-
ence-fiction theory just as the Thomas
kid had told it to me, and
added their own embellishments.
Some guy said he knew how the
invaders could be stopped. He had
been approached by them, he said,
and they'd offered him controllership
of a small galaxy if he'd cooperate.
Of course, he wouldn't.

It sounds foolish, but the sky was
getting pretty bare. People in every
country were saying foolish things
and doing foolish things. We were
starting to wonder how soon our own
sun would go.

I watched every night, and the
stars disappeared faster and faster.
The thing seemed to increase at a
geometric rate. Soon the sky was
just filled with little lights going
out, faster than you could count. Al-
most all of it could be seen with the
naked eye now, because it was get-
ting a lot closer to us.

In two weeks the only part of the
Milky Way left were the Magellanic
clouds, and the astronomers said that
they weren't a part of our galaxy
anyhow. Betelgeuse and Actares and
Rigel winked out, and Sirius and
Vega. Then Alpha Centauri dis-
appeared, and that was our closest
neighbor. Aside from the moon, the
sky was pretty bare at night, just

a few dots and patches here and there.

I don't know what would have happened if the voice hadn't been heard then. It would be anybody's guess. But the voice came the day after Alpha Centauri vanished.

I first heard it on my way to the store. I was walking down Lexington Avenue from the 59th Street station, looking in the dress windows to see what my competitors had to offer. Just as I was passing *Mary-Belle's Frocks*, and wondering how soon they'd have their Summer line in, I heard it.

It was a pleasant voice, friendly. It seemed to come from just behind me, about three feet over my shoulder.

"Judgment of the inhabitants of the planet Earth," it said, *"will be held in five days. Please prepare yourselves for final examination and departure. This announcement will be repeated."*

I looked around at once to find out who was speaking. I half-expected to find a tall, cadaverous fanatic at my shoulder, some fiery-eyed fellow with flowing hair and a beard. But there was no one at all. The nearest person was about fifteen feet from me. For a moment I thought I was having a hallucination, hearing voices, that sort of thing. Then I saw that everyone else must have heard it, too.

Lexington Avenue is a pretty busy

place at nine o'clock in the morning. There are plenty of people hurrying back and forth, kids going to school, subways roaring beneath you, cars and buses honking. Not now. You couldn't hear a sound. Every car had stopped, right where it was. The people on the sidewalks seemed frozen practically in mid-stride.

The man nearest me walked up. He was well-dressed, about my age—in his early forties. He was eyeing me with suspicion, as though I might have been responsible for the whole thing. I suppose I was looking at him in the same way.

"Did you hear it?" he asked me.

"Yes," I said.

"Did you do it?"

"No. Did you?"

"Most certainly not," he said indignantly. We stood for a few seconds, just looking at each other. I think we—everybody—knew, right there and then, that it was no hoax. What with the stars disappearing. I mean.

A pretty girl in a fur coat walked up to me. She was young; she looked scared, and very defiant.

"Did you hear it?" she asked us.

"Yes," I said, and the man nodded.

"Is it possible that she was operating on a loudspeaker?" the girl asked.

She?" we both said.

"That woman's voice," the girl said, looking a little exasperated. "A young woman—she said, 'Judgment

of the inhabitants — ”

“It was a man’s voice,” the man said. “Of that I’m certain.” He looked at me, and I nodded.

“Oh no,” the girl told us. “A girl — she even had a slight New England accent — it was unmistakable.” She looked around for support.

The people on Lexington Avenue had gathered in small groups. There were knots of people up and down the sidewalks as far as I could see. The cars still weren’t moving. Most of the drivers had gotten out to ask someone else about the voice.

“Say, pardon me,” some man said to me. “Am I hearing things or did you hear — ”

That’s how it was for the next hour. Everyone, it seemed, had heard it. But every woman was sure it had been a woman’s voice, and every man was sure it had been a man’s. I left finally, and went to my store.

Minnie, the salesgirl, and Frank, my stock boy, were already there. They had the radio on, but they were talking over it.

“Say, Mr. Ostersen,” Frank called as I walked in. “Did *you* hear it?”

I sat down and discussed it with them, but we couldn’t tell each other much. Frank had been in the store when he heard it. Minnie had just been walking in, her hand on the doorknob. Minnie was sure it was a girl’s voice, about her own age, with just the trace of a Bronx

accent. Frank and I held out for a man’s voice, but where I was sure the man was in his early forties or late thirties, Frank was positive it was a young man, about twenty or twenty-two.

We noticed the radio, finally. It had been broadcasting all that time, but we hadn’t paid any attention.

“ . . . voice was heard in all parts of the country, at nine-oh-three this morning, Eastern Standard Time. This voice, purporting to be that of — of the, ah, Deity, announcing the Judgment Day, was heard — ah, was heard in all parts of the country.” The voice hesitated, then continued. “In place of our usual program, we now bring you the Reverend Joseph Morrison, who will speak on — ” The voice stopped for a moment, then came back with renewed vigor. “The Reverend Joseph Morrison!”

We listened to the radio most of the morning. The Reverend Joseph Morrison seemed as confused as the rest of us, but he was followed by news announcements. The voice had been heard, as far as they could make out, in every country on earth. It had spoken in every language, every dialect and sub-dialect.

Minnie looked dazed as the reports piled in, and Frank looked shocked. I suppose I looked as startled as my normal dead-pan would show. At eleven-forty-five I decided to call my wife. No use. I couldn’t even get the operator.

“ . . . possibilities that this is a

hoax," a voice was saying from the radio in an unconvincing tone. "Mass hallucinations are far from unknown, and the chance must be considered. In the Middle Ages . . ."

Cutting through our conversation, and through the blaring radio, smooth as a knife through butter, the voice came again.

"Judgment of the inhabitants of the planet Earth will be held in five days. Please prepare yourselves for final examination and departure. This announcement will be repeated."

Departure! I thought. Where were we going?

"There!" Frank shouted. "You see—it was a young man!"

"You're crazy!" Minnie screamed at him. Her hair had fallen over her eyes; she looked like an impassioned cocker spaniel.

"You're crazy!" Frank shouted back. They stood glaring at each other. Minnie seemed about ready to throw the cash register at him.

"Easy now," I said. "It seems—it seems like the voice speaks in everybody's language, and sounds like the sort of voice everybody would know."

"But how's that possible?" Frank asked me.

"I don't know. But it's certainly logical. If the voice spoke just in Latin or Hebrew or English, none of the Arabs would understand. Or the Armenians. So, while it's speaking everybody's language, it might

as well speak everybody's dialect at the same time."

"Should we call it *it*?" Frank asked in a whisper. He glanced over his shoulder, as though he expected to find an avenging angel there. "Shouldn't we refer to it as *Him*?"

"She, you mean," Minnie said. "The old masculine idea that God must be a man is just so much ego-wash. Why, the feminine principle is evident all through the universe. Why, why, you just can't say Him when-when—"

Minnie had never been too strong on ideas. She ran out of breath and stood, panting and pushing back her hair.

After a while we talked about it calmly, and listened to the radio. There were more speakers and another survey of the countries that had heard the second announcement. At two o'clock I told them to go home. It was no use trying to get any work done that day. Besides, there were no customers.

The subways were running again when I reached the BMT, and I rode to my home in Queens.

"Of course you heard it?" My wife asked me at the door.

"Of course," I said. "Was it spoken by a woman in her middle-thirties, with just the trace of a Queens accent?"

"Yes!" Jane said. "Thank God we can agree on something!" But of course we couldn't.

We talked about it all through

supper, and we talked about it after supper. At nine o'clock the announcement came again, from behind and above our shoulders.

"Judgment of the inhabitants of the planet Earth will be held in five days. Please prepare yourselves for final examination and departure. That is all."

"Well," Jane said. "I guess She means it."

"I guess He does," I said. So we went to bed.

THE next day I went in to work, although I don't know why. I knew that this was It, and everyone else knew it too. But it seemed right to go back to work, end of the world or not. Most of my adult life had been bound up in that store, and I wanted a day more with it. I had some idea of getting my affairs in order, although I knew it couldn't matter.

The subway ride was murderous. New York is always a crowded city, but it seemed as though the whole United States had moved in. The subways were so tightly jammed the doors couldn't even close. When I finally got out, the streets were filled from one curb to the other. Traffic had given up, and people were piling out of cars and buses anywhere they were stopped, adding to the jam in the streets.

In the store, Frank and Minnie were already there. I guess they had the same idea—about gathering up

loose ends.

"Gee, Mr. Osterson," Frank said. "What do you think He'll do — about our sins, I mean?" Frank was twenty-one, and I couldn't see how he could have committed an unusual number of sins. But he was worried about them. The way he frowned and paced around, he might have been the devil himself.

Minnie didn't have any sins on her mind, as far as I could see. She was wearing what must have been her best dress—she hadn't bought it in my store—and her hair was a lighter brown than it had been yesterday. I suspected she wanted to look her best in front of the Almighty, be He man or woman.

We talked about sins most of the morning, and listened to the radio. The radio had a lot to say about sins, but no two speakers agreed.

Around lunchtime, Ollie Bernstein dropped in.

"Hiya, ex-competitor," he said, standing in the doorway. "How's business?"

"I sold five dozen halos," I told him. "How's with you?"

"What's it matter?" he asked, coming sideways through the doorway. "Four days before Judgment, who cares? Come have lunch with me, ex-competitor."

Ollie and I had never been on really friendly terms. We sold the same price line, and our stores were too close for mutual comfort. Also, he was fat and I've always been

suspicious of fat men. But suddenly, I found myself liking him. It seemed a shame I hadn't recognized his solid qualities years ago.

We went to Lotto's, a classy place on East 73rd Street. We had hoped to avoid some of the crowd by going uptown, but there wasn't a chance of it. Lotto's was packed, and we stood three-quarters of an hour for a table.

Seated, we ordered roast duck, but had to settle for hamburger steak. The waiter told us people had been walking in and ordering roast duck all morning.

Lotto's had a radio—probably for the first time in its existence—and a minister or rabbi was speaking. He was interrupted by a news announcement.

"The war in Indo-China is over," the announcer said. "Peace was declared at 7:30 this morning. Also, a general truce has been called in Mongolia, and in Tanganyika." There was a lot of that. In Indo-China, it seemed that the rebels had given up the country to the French, declaring that all men should live in peace. The French immediately announced they were withdrawing their forces as fast as they could get planes for them. Every Frenchman was going to spend the last three days before Judgment in Paris.

For a moment I wished I was in Paris.

The announcer also said, the Russian airforce had agreed to pilot the

Frenchmen home.

It was the same everywhere. Every country was leaning over backward, giving up this and that, offering land to its neighbors, shipping food to less fortunate areas, and so forth.

We listened over a bottle of Moselle—all the champagne had been drunk that morning. I think I got a little high. Anyhow, I walked back with my arms around two total strangers. We were assuring each other that peace, it was wonderful.

And it was at that.

I went home early, to miss the evening rush. It was still rough going. I grinned at my wife as I reached the door, and she grinned back. Jane was a little high, also.

THE next day I brought my wife into the city. With three days left to go, two really because you couldn't count the Day itself, we figured we'd move into a good hotel, buy an armload of classical records and have our own private, quiet celebration. I thought we deserved it, although I could have been wrong.

Frank was already at the store when we got there. He was all dressed up, and he had a suitcase with him.

"What's up, Frank?" I asked.

"Well, Mr. Ostersen," he said, "with only two days left, I'm going to go on my first airplane trip. I'm flying to Texas."

"Oh?" I asked.

"Yessir," Frank said. He shuffled his feet, as if he knew he was doing something foolish. But his face was set. He was waiting for me to tell him not to go.

"I'm going out where I can ride a horse. Mr. Ostersen, I've always dreamed of going to Texas and riding a horse. It isn't just the horses, I want the airplane ride too, and I want to see what all that land looks like. I was figuring on doing it this summer, on my vacation, but now—well, I'm going."

I walked to the back of the store and opened the safe. I had four thousand dollars there; the rest was in the bank. I came back and handed Frank two thousand.

"Here, kid," I said. "Buy a horse for me." He just stared at me for a second, then dashed out. There wasn't much to say. Besides, it was an easy gesture. The stuff was as good as worthless. Might as well see the other fellow have a good time.

For once my wife seemed to agree with me. She smiled.

Minnie came in almost as soon as Frank left. She was all dressed up, too, in another dress she hadn't bought in my store. There was a young fellow with her. He wasn't good-looking or bad-looking; just the sort of fellow you'd see anywhere. But Minnie seemed to think he was something pretty special, to judge by the way she was clutching

his arm.

"Are you going to Texas too?" I asked.

"Oh, no," she said: "I'm getting married."

"Oh?" Jane asked.

"Yes ma'am," Minnie said. "Herb and I were going to wait 'til he finished dental school, so he shouldn't be living off his parents. But now—" She looked very cute. Her hair was a light blonde. It looked fine on her.

"Here, Minnie," my wife said. She took the other two thousand out of my hand and gave it to her. "Have a good time these last days."

"Hey!" I said, when Minnie and her young man had gone. "How about us? We'll never be able to get in a bank. What'll we do?"

"Quit worrying," Jane told me. "Don't you believe in young love?" She found the one comfortable chair in the place—the one we reserve for customers—and sat down.

"I've been too careful," she said when she saw me looking at her.

"I see," I said.

"And as far as money goes," she continued. "Haven't you any faith? The Lord will provide."

"That's fine by me," I said, and sat down beside her. The door opened, and in walked a short man. He was oldish, and dressed like a banker, but I knew right away he was in the dress line. There's something about the dress line, you can always tell.

"Not much business?" he asked.

"Not much." There hadn't been a customer in all day—or all yesterday, now that I thought about it.

"That's understandable," he told me. "It's because everyone is storming the big stores, the expensive stores. Everyone wants to wear the best dresses on their last days."

"Sounds logical," I said.

"Logical, but not entirely right," he said, frowning seriously through little pince-nez. "Why should the big, expensive stores drive the middle-class retailer out of business? I am here as a representative of Bonzelli's—to reimburse you for your financial loss." With that he dropped a thick manilla envelope on the counter, smiled, and left.

"Bonzelli's," my wife commented coolly. "They're—expensive."

Inside the envelope there was eight thousand dollars.

THAT wasn't the end of it.

Strangers dropped in every few minutes, leaving money. After a while, I started handing it back. I went down the block to Ollie Bernstein's store, with twenty thousand dollars in a paper bag. I met him on the way. He had a fistful of bills.

"I've got a little gift for you, ex-competitor," he said. It was about fifteen thousand dollars. Everyone with money was handing it over, and getting it back from someone else.

"I've got an idea," I said. "How about the unfortunate?"

"You mean the Bronx dress shops?" he asked.

"No, I mean the derelicts, the bums. Why shouldn't they share?"

"Count me in for fifteen thousand," he said without hesitation. We talked it over. Plans for going down to the Bowery and handing it out didn't seem so good. The streets were still impossible, and I didn't want to leave Jane for long. We finally decided to give it to the nearest church. They'd see it got into the proper hands.

The church on 65th and Madison was closest, so we went right there and formed on the end of the line. It stretched halfway down the block, but it was moving fast.

"I had no idea it was like this," Ollie said. He shook his head. Perspiration was dripping from him. He was working harder handing out money than he had ever worked to make it in his life.

"What kind of church is this?" he asked me.

"I don't know." I tapped the man in front of me. "What kind of church is this, mac?"

The man turned around. He was almost as big as Ollie but older, tinner looking. "How should I know?" he said. "I'm from Brooklyn."

We reached the inside of the church and a man took our money. He didn't have time to thank us; there were too many behind, clam-

oring for their chance. The man just threw the bills on a table. Another man, a Reverend of some kind, was walking back and forth, picking up handfuls of it and carrying it off, then coming back for more. We followed him, just out of curiosity. I didn't have any doubt they'd dispose of it in the right way, but a fellow likes to know where his charity is going. Besides, Jane would probably ask me.

At the side entrance of the church there was a line of poorly clad, red-faced men. Their clothes were in tatters, but their faces were shining. The Reverend was handing each man a handful of bills, then rushing back for more.

"Be simpler if they formed the line inside," I said to Ollie as we headed back for our stores. "Just have the guys with money lined up in front of the guys without. Faster."

"Listen," Ollie said. "You always have a middle man. Can't avoid it." He coughed three or four times. I could see that the strain was getting him. A man Ollie's size shouldn't run around handing out money that way.

On my way back to the store someone handed me five thousand dollars. He just grinned, shoved it in my hands and hurried on. I did a double take. It was one of the bums who had just got it.

Back in the store there was more money piled up on the counter. My wife was still in the same chair,

reading a magazine.

"It's been piling up since you left," she said.

I threw my five thousand on the pile.

"You should have heard the radio," she said. "Congress passed about two dozen laws in the last hour. They've given everybody every right you could think of, and a few I never dreamed existed."

"It's the age of the common man," I told her.

FOR an hour I stood at the door handing out money, but it was just plain foolishness. The streets were mobbed with people handing out the stuff. Everyone wanted to give it away. It was a game; the rich gave it to the poor, and the poor turned around and handed it back to the rich. By two o'clock it was impossible to tell who had been rich and who poor.

In the meantime, Jane kept me posted on what was going on over the radio. Every country on the face of the earth was passing emancipation acts as quick as they could get a quorum together. The age of the common man had really come in—two days before deadline.

Jane and I left for lunch at three o'clock. We both knew it would be the last time we'd see the store. As a final gesture, we piled fifty thousand dollars or so on the counter, and left the doors open. It seemed the only thing we could do.

We ate in an East Sixty-third

street restaurant. The regular help had left, but people wandered in off the streets, cooked for a while, ate and left. Jane fixed a few dozen club sandwiches for our share, and then we ate. The next problem was where to sleep. I was sure all the hotels would be full, but we had to try. In an emergency we could sleep in the store.

We walked into the Stanton-Carler, one of the biggest hotels in New York. There was a young man behind the main desk, reading *The World as Will and Idea*, by Schopenhauer.

"Any chance of a room?" I asked him.

"Here's a pass key," he said. "Take any vacant room you can find."

"How much?" I asked, fanning a few thousand dollar bills.

"Are you kidding?" he said, and returned to his book. He looked like a very serious young man.

We found a vacant room on the fifteenth floor, and sat down as soon as we were inside. Immediately, Jane jumped up again.

"Records," she said. "I want to spend the day before Judgment listening to good music."

I was dog-tired, but I wanted the same thing. Jane and I had never had enough time to listen to all the music we wanted to hear. Somehow, we had never gotten around to it.

Jane wanted to go with me, but I thought, what with the jam New

York was in, it would be easier if I went alone.

"Lock the door until I get back," I told her. "It may be the day before Judgment, but not everyone's an angel yet." She winked at me. She hadn't winked in years.

I scrambled through the crowd to a music store. It was deserted. I picked up a long-playing recorder and all the records I could carry. Then I came back. I had to walk to the fifteenth floor, because some guy was zooming up and down in one elevator, and the rest were out of order.

"Put on the Debussy," I told Jane when I got back, throwing myself in an armchair. It was a joy and a pleasure to be off my feet.

That's how we spent the rest of the day, and the evening. We played records. I had gotten some Bach, Debussy, Mozart, Hayden, and a few others I never heard of. I listened to more music in that day than I'd heard in five years previously.

WE woke up late the next day, about one-thirty in the afternoon. I felt guilty. It didn't seem right to sleep away the day before Judgment.

"Seems as good as any other way," Jane said. Perhaps she was right. Anyhow, we were both ravenously hungry. Jane's feet were blistered, because she hadn't moved around so much since we were courting.

"Stay put," I said. "Your shining

knight will bring you lunch. My last good deed."

"Your first," she told me, smiling.

"Lock that door," I said, and left. I just don't trust people very much. I don't know why. Even on the day before Judgment, I couldn't trust everyone.

The streets were empty when I finally got down. A few people were walking around, peering nervously over their shoulders. A few more had joyous smiles on their faces. But the streets were very bare. Cars, taxis and buses had been left haphazardly all over the street. The traffic lights were still clicking red and green, but there was no traffic to regulate.

I saw no sign of a policeman, and remembered that I hadn't seen any since shortly after the announcement. I didn't know if I liked that, but I supposed that cops are human too. They might like to spend their last days with their families, also. And who was going to steal anything?

It might be a good idea, I thought, to drop into a church and offer up a prayer. Not that it would make any difference, or even that I especially wanted to. But I thought Jane would like me to. I tried three churches, but they were all packed, with hundreds waiting outside. Now I knew where everybody was.

I think I might have waited too, but Jane was expecting her lunch. I went on to a restaurant.

On my way back with a bundle

of food, five people stopped me and tried to give me money. They seemed desperate. They explained that they had to get rid of it—and they had no idea how to. After working for it all their lives, it didn't seem right just to throw it away. And no one would take it now. They were really perplexed.

One man in particular struck me. "Please take it, old man," he said. "I've been unfortunate—I've accumulated so much of it, it's almost impossible to dispose of it all. And I don't want it on my—hands. I really don't. Won't you accept a portion of it?"

I recognized him. He was an actor, and a well-known one. I had always enjoyed watching him, so I took a pile of bills off his hands, leaving it on the desk of the hotel. The young man who had been reading Schopenhauer was no longer there.

Jane and I ate, and listened to some more music. We listened to it the rest of the day, and didn't talk much. Towards evening Jane's eyes were soft. I knew she was thinking back over our life. I thought back too. It didn't seem so bad. Not really. I had made a few mistakes, but still not so bad.

Night came, and we made supper out of leftovers. We didn't want to go out for anything, and we didn't want to go to sleep.

"It'll come just at dawn," Jane said. I tried to tell her you can't predict the ways of the Almighty, but she wasn't going to sell out her

woman's intuition for anything. She was sure.

That was a long night, and not a very good one. I felt as though I were a prisoner at the bar. It wasn't a very good way to feel, but I was frightened. I suppose everybody was.

Standing at the window I saw the first light of the false dawn. It was going to be a beautiful day over New York. There were no visible stars, but every light in the city was on, making stars of its own. It was as though the city was burning candles to the unknown.

"Goodbye, Jane," I said. I knew she was right. The announcement would come just at dawn. I hoped Minnie was in her husband's arms; and Frank—I felt he was probably on a horse, standing up in the unfamiliar saddle and looking toward the East. I hoped he was.

"Goodbye, dear," Jane said, and kissed me. There was a cool breeze from the open window, and darkness in the sky. It was beautiful, at that moment. It should have ended just like that.

"There will be a slight delay," the voice said from behind my shoulder, as pleasant as ever, and as distant, *"in settling the affairs of the inhabitants of the planet Earth. The final examination and departure will be held ten years from this date."*

I stood at the window, my arm around Jane. We couldn't say anything for perhaps ten minutes.

"Well," I said to her finally.

"Well, well."

"Well," she said. We were silent for a few more minutes. Then she said, "Well," again.

There was nothing else to say.

I looked out the window. Below me the city was sparkling with lights; the sun was coming up, and everything was deadly quiet. The only sound I could hear was the buzzing of an electric sign. It sounded like a broken alarm clock, or like a time bomb, perhaps.

"You'll have to go back to work," Jane said. She started to cry. "Although I suppose ten years is only a second in eternity. Only a second to Her."

"Less," I said. "A fraction of a second. Less."

"But not to us," Jane said.

* * *

It certainly should have ended there. Judgment day should have come, bringing with it whatever it brought. We were ready. All the wordly goods were disposed of, in New York and I suppose, in the rest of the world. But ten years was too long, too much a strain on goodness.

We should have been able to carry on. There was no reason why not. We could have gone back to our jobs. The farmers were still on the farms, the grocers and clerks were still around.

We could have done such a bang-up job of it. We could have pointed to that ten years with pride, and said, "You see! Our recorded history

of thousands of years of avarice, cruelty and hate isn't the whole story. For ten years were good and clean and noble. For ten years we were brothers!"

Unfortunately, it wasn't that way.

The farmers didn't want to go back to their farms, and the grocers didn't want to return to their groceries. Oh, some did. Many did, for a while. But not for long. Everyone talked about high ideals, but it was just talk, just like before.

For six months Jane and I struggled along, not getting much to eat, frightened by the mobs that surged around New York. Finally, we decided to move out. We joined the exodus leaving New York, drifted through Pennsylvania, and headed North.

The country was disrupted, but it pulled itself together again, after a fashion. Thousands were starving, then millions. Some had food, but they weren't very willing to share it. They were figuring what they'd do for ten years, if they shared their food. Money they'd still hand out in basketfuls. It wasn't worth anything. In nine months a million dollars wouldn't buy a rotten turnip.

As time passed, fewer and fewer stayed on the job. The money they got wouldn't buy anything. Besides, why work when the end was so near? Why work for someone else?

In about a year there was the Bulgaria incident. An American in Sophia disappeared. He just vanished. The American Embassy com-

plained. They were told to go home. The Bulgarians didn't want any interference for their last nine years of existence. Besides, they added that they didn't know where the man was. Maybe they were telling the truth. People vanish even here.

Anyhow, after our third ultimatum we bombed them. The attack coincided with a bombing launched on us by China, who decided we were interfering with her trade with Japan.

Great Britain was bombed, and bombed someone else. Everyone started bombing everyone else.

I took Jane out of the city where we were staying, and headed for the open country. We ran and stumbled over the fields, with the roar of the planes above us. We hid in ditches. Jane was cut down by machine gun bullets in one raid. Perhaps she was fortunate. She missed the atom bombs the next week, and she missed the hydrogen bombs a week later.

I wasn't around when they dropped the H bomb. I was in central Canada, and heading for open country. But I heard the noise, I saw the smoke. They had bombed New York.

After that, everyone threw the biggest bombs they had, as fast as they could, at anything that might be called a target. Radioactive dust followed, and bacteria followed that. Gas was used, some stuff that hung close to the ground for days; only a good sized storm or two would

blow it away.

All this time I was heading North. Most of the traffic was South, because there was a famine in the North. But I figured I'd rather take my chances with starvation than with the bacteria and dust. As it was, the germs almost got me. I was sick for a day. I wanted to die. If I'd had a gun I would have shot myself. But I lived, and the bacteria never touched me again.

I joined up with a few men below the Arctic Circle, but had to leave them. One of them fell sick a day after I joined, and another followed him. I figured I was a carrier, so I left in the night, still heading North.

They bombed the North, too, to make sure no one got the pitch-blende. I ran through the woods; I hid in caves. At night I would look at the moon, and the little sprinkling of stars left across the sky.

After the fourth year I didn't see any more human beings. I didn't have time to look. All my day was spent filling my belly. It was a full-time job, just to gather grasses, and perhaps kill a rabbit with a stone. I became pretty handy with stones.

I didn't even know when the ten years were up.

To sum up, I don't suppose I'm the last man on earth. There must be others, hiding in caves in other parts of the world, waiting on islands, on mountaintops. You can check my story with them, if you can find them, but I think you'll find it pretty accurate.

Now as for me . . .

I suppose I've been as sinful as most, but that's for you to judge, Sir.

My name is Adam Osterson. I was born in Pine Grove, Maine, in June of . . .

Gas From Coal!

THE gigantic American living standard is having its future threatened by the waning of our natural resources and by the threat of imminent war—that worry has been bothering lots of people. We have only a limited amount of gas and oil in the ground even though geologists are continually uncovering new deposits. There is one resource however, that really is unlimited—ancient, modern King Coal!

And right now there are in existence two or three American pilot plants devoted solely to changing coal and shale into gas, gasoline and

oil. While at the present time they can't compete with the natural product, they are laying the groundwork for a future massive undertaking, for the time when it will be economical to do the job.

The point of this conversion from coal to gas and oil is to provide Americans with the tremendous amounts of liquid fuels they're going to need to power their cars and helicopters, their homes and factories. Liquid fuels are nourishment and pipelines are our arteries. The coal-changers will see that they remain that way—come depletion or war!

THE Dark lived in a hole in the bank of the sand wash where Stevie liked to play. The Dark wanted to come out, but Stevie had fixed it so it couldn't. He put a row of special little magic rocks in front of the hole. Stevie knew they were magic because he found them himself and they felt like magic. When you are as old as Stevie—five—a whole hand of years old—





By
Zenna Henderson

It lived in a deep black hole, and it wanted to come out. But Stevie knew it was bad so he kept it locked up with his magic stones. Until one day—

THE DARK CAME OUT TO PLAY...

you know lots of things and you know what magic feels like.

Stevie had the rocks in his pocket when he first found The Dark. He had been digging a garage in the side of the wash when a piece of the bank came loose and slid down onto him. One rock hit him on the forehead hard enough to make him cry—if he had been only four. But Stevie was five, so he wiped the blood with the back of his hand and scraped away the dirt to find the big spoon Mommy let him take to dig with. Then he saw that the hole was great big and his spoon was just inside it. So he reached in for it and The Dark came out a little ways and touched Stevie. It covered up his hand clear to the wrist and when Stevie jerked away, his hand was cold and all skinned across the back. For a minute it was white and stiff, then the blood came out and it hurt and Stevie got mad. So he took out the magic rocks and put the little red one down in front of the hole. The Dark came out again with just a little finger-piece and touched the red rock, but it didn't like the magic so it started to push around it. Stevie put down the other little rocks—the round smooth white ones and the smooth yellow ones.

The Dark made a lot of little fingers that were trying to get past the magic. There was just one hole left, so Stevie put down the black-see-through rock he found that morning. Then The Dark pulled back all the

little fingers and began to pour over the black rock. So, quick like a rabbit, Stevie drew a magic in the sand and The Dark pulled back into the hole again. Then Stevie marked King's X all around the hole and ran to get some more magic rocks. He found a white one with a band of blue around the middle and another yellow one. He went back and put the rocks in front of the hole and rubbed out the King's X. The Dark got mad and piled up behind the rocks until it was higher than Stevie's head.

Stevie was scared, but he stood still and held tight to his pocket-piece. He knew that was the magic-est of all and The Dark couldn't ever hurt him while he held it, but it was kind of scary to see The Dark standing up like that in the bright hot sunshine. The Dark didn't have any head or arms or legs or body. It didn't have any eyes either, but it was looking at Stevie. It didn't have any mouth, but it was mumbling at Stevie. He could hear it inside his head and the mumbles were hate, so Stevie squatted down in the sand and drew a magic again—a big magic—and The Dark jerked back into the hole. Stevie turned and ran as fast as he could until the mumbles in his ears turned into fast wind and the sound of rattling rocks on the road.

NEXT day Arnold came with his mother to visit at Stevie's house.

Stevie didn't like Arnold. He was a tattle-tale and a cry-baby even if he was a whole hand and two more fingers old. Stevie took him down to the sand wash to play. They didn't go down where The Dark was, but while they were digging tunnels around the roots of the cottonwood tree, Stevie could feel The Dark, like a long deep thunder that only your bones could hear—not your ears. He knew the big magic he wrote in the sand was gone and The Dark was trying to get past the magic rocks.

Pretty soon Arnold began to brag.

"I got a Hopalong Cassidy gun."

Stevie threw some more sand backwards. "So've I," he said.

"I got a two-wheel bike."

Stevie sat back on his heels. "Hon-est?"

"Sure!" Arnold talked real smarty. "You're too little to have a two-wheel bike. You couldn't ride it if you had one."

"Could too." Stevie went back to his digging, feeling bad inside. He had fallen off Rusty's bike when he tried to ride it. Arnold didn't know it though.

"Could not," Arnold caved in his tunnel. "I've got a BB gun and a real saw and a cat with three-and-a-half legs."

Stevie sat down in the sand. What could you get better than a cat with three-and-a-half legs? He traced a magic in the sand.

"I've got something you haven't."

"Have not." Arnold caved in Stevie's tunnel.

"Have too. It's a Dark."

"A what?"

"A Dark. I've got it in a hole down there." He jerked his head down the wash.

"Aw, you're crazy. There ain't no dark. You're just talking baby stuff."

Stevie felt his face getting hot. "I am not. You just come and see."

HE dragged Arnold by the hand down the wash with the sand crunching under foot like spilled sugar and sifting in and out of their barefoot sandles. They squatted in front of the hole. The Dark had pulled way back in so they couldn't see it.

"I don't see nothing." Arnold leaned forward to look into the hole. "There ain't no dark. You're just silly."

"I am not! And The Dark is so in that hole."

"Sure it's dark in the hole, but that ain't nothing. You can't have a dark, silly."

"Can too." Stevie reached in his pocket and took tight hold of his pocket piece. "You better cross your fingers. I'm going to let it out a little ways."

"Aw!" Arnold didn't believe him, but he crossed his fingers anyway.

Stevie took two of the magic rocks away from in front of the hole and moved back. The Dark came pouring out like a flood. It poured in a

thin stream through the open place in the magic and shot up like a tower of smoke. Arnold was so surprised that he uncrossed his fingers and The Dark wrapped around his head and he began to scream and scream. The Dark sent a long arm out to Stevie, but Stevie pulled out his pocket-piece and hit The Dark. Stevie could hear The Dark scream inside his head so he hit it again and The Dark fell all together and got littler so Stevie pushed it back into the hole with his pocket-piece. He put the magic rocks back and wrote two big magics in the sand so that The Dark cried again and hid way back in the hole.

Arnold was lying on the sand with his face all white and stiff, so Stevie shook him and called him. Arnold opened his eyes and his face turned red and began to bleed. He started to bawl, "Mama! Mama!" and ran for the house as fast as he could through the soft sand. Stevie followed him, yelling, "You uncrossed your fingers! It's your fault! You uncrossed your fingers!"

ARNOLD and his mother went home. Arnold was still bawling and his mother was real red around the nose when she yelled at Mommy. "You'd better learn to control that brat of yours or he'll grow up a murderer! Look what he did to my poor Arnold!" And she drove away so fast that she hit the chuck-hole by the gate and nearly wen: off the

road.

Mommy sat down on the front step and took Stevie between her knees. Stevie looked down and traced a little, soft magic with his finger on Mommy's slacks.

"What happened, Stevie?"

Stevie squirmed. "Nothing, Mommy. We were just playing in the wash."

"Why did you hurt Arnold?"

"I didn't. Honest. I didn't even touch him."

"But the whole side of his face was skinned." Mommy put on her no-fooling-now voice. "Tell me what happened, Stevie."

Stevie gulped. "Well, Arnold was bragging 'bout his two wheel bike and—" Stevie got excited and looked up. "And Mommy, he has a cat with three-and-a-half legs!"

"Go on."

Stevie leaned against her again.

"Well, I've got a Dark in a hole in the wash so I—"

"A Dark? What is that?"

"It's, it's just a Dark. It isn't very nice. I keep it in its hole with magic. I let it out a little bit to show Arnold and it hurt him. But it was his fault. He uncrossed his fingers."

Mommy sighed. "What *really* happened, Stevie?

"I told you, Mommy! Honest, that's what happened."

"For True, Stevie?" She looked right in his eyes.

Stevie looked right back. "Yes, Mommy, For True."

She sighed again. "Well, son, I guess this Dark business is the same as your Mr. Bop and Toody Troot."

"Uh, uh!" Stevie shook his head. "No sir. Mr. Bop and Toody Troot are nice. The Dark is bad."

"Well, don't play with it any more then."

"I *don't* play with it," protested Stevie. "I just keep it shut up with magic."

"All right, son." She stood up and brushed the dust off the back of her slacks. "Only for the love of Toody Troot, don't let Arnold get hurt again." She smiled at Stevie.

Stevie smiled back. "O. K., Mommy. But it was his fault. He uncrossed his fingers. He's a baby."

THE next time Stevie was in the wash playing cowboy on Burro Eddie, he heard The Dark calling him. It called so sweet and soft that anybody would think it was something nice, but Stevie could feel the bad rumble way down under the nice, so he made sure his pocket-piece was handy, shooed Eddie away, and went down to the hole and squatted down in front of it.

The Dark stood up behind the magic rocks and it had made itself look like Arnold only its eyes didn't match and it had forgotten one ear and it was freckled all over like Arnold's face.

"Hello," said The Dark with its Arnold-mouth. "Let's play."

"No," said Stevie. "You can't fool

me. You're still The Dark."

"I won't hurt you." The Arnold-face stretched out sideways to make a smile, but it wasn't a very good one. "Let me out and I'll show you how to have lots of fun."

"No," said Stevie, "If you weren't bad, the magic couldn't hold you. I don't want to play with bad things."

"Why not?" asked The Dark. "Being bad is fun sometimes—lots of fun."

"I guess it is," said Stevie, "but only if it's a little bad. A big bad makes your stomach sick and you have to have a spanking or a sit-in-the-corner and then a big loving from Mommy or Daddy before it gets well again."

"Aw, come on," said The Dark. "I'm lonesome. Nobody ever comes to play with me. I like you. Let me out and I'll give you a two-wheel bike."

"Really?" Stevie felt all warm inside. "For True?"

"For True. And a cat with three-and-a-half legs."

"Oh!" Stevie felt like Christmas morning. "Honest?"

"Honest. All you have to do is take away the rocks and break up your pocket-piece and I'll fix everything for you."

"My pocket-piece?" The warmth was going away. "No sir, I won't either break it up. It's the magicest thing I've got and it was hard to make."

"But I can give you some bet-

ter magic."

"Nothing can be more magic." Stevie tightened his hand around his pocket-piece. "Anyway, Daddy said I might get a two-wheel bike for my birthday. I'll be six years old. How old are you?"

The Dark moved back and forth. "I'm as old as the world."

Stevie laughed. "Then you must know Auntie Phronie. Daddy says she's as old as the hills."

"The hills are young," said The Dark. "Come on, Stevie, let me out. Please—pretty please."

"Well," Stevie reached for the pretty red rock. "Promise you'll be good."

"I promise."

STEVIE hesitated. He could feel a funniness in The Dark's voice. It sounded like Lili-cat when she purred to the mice she caught. It sounded like pooch-pup when he growled softly to the gophers he ate sometimes. It made Stevie feel funny inside and, as he squatted there wondering what the feeling was, lightning flashed brightly above the tree tops and a few big rain drops splashed down with the crash of thunder.

"Well," said Stevie, standing up, feeling relieved. "It's going to rain. I can't play with you now. I have to go. Maybe I can come see you tomorrow."

"No, now!" said The Dark. "Let me out right now!" and its Arnold

face was all twisted and one eye was slipping down one cheek.

Stevie started to back away, his eyes feeling big and scared. "Another time. I can't play in the wash when it storms. There might be a flood."

"Let me out!" The Dark was getting madder. The Arnold-face turned purple and its eyes ran down its face like sick fire and it melted back into blackness again. "Let me out!" The Dark hit the magic so hard that it shook the sand and one of the rocks started to roll. Quick like a rabbit, Stevie pressed the rock down hard and fixed all the others too. Then The Dark twisted itself into a thing so awful looking that Stevie's stomach got sick and he wanted to up-chuck. He took out his pocket-piece and drew three hard magics in the sand and The Dark screamed so hard that Stevie screamed, too, and ran home to Mommy and was very sick.

Mommy put him to bed and gave him some medicine to comfort his stomach and told Daddy he'd better buy Stevie a hat. The sun was too hot for a towheaded, bareheaded boy in the middle of July.

STEVIE stayed away from the wash for a while after that, but one day Burro Eddie opened the gate with his teeth again and wandered off down the road, headed for the wash. It had been storming again in the Whetstones. Mommy

said, "You'd better go after Eddie. The flood will be coming down the wash this afternoon and if Eddie gets caught, he'll get washed right down into the river."

"Aw, Eddie can swim," said Stevie.

"Sure he can, but not in a flash flood. Remember what happened to Durkin's horse last year."

"Yeah," said Stevie, wide-eyed. "It got drowned. It even went over the dam. It was dead."

"Very dead," laughed Mommy, "So you scoot along and bring Eddie back. But remember, if there's any water at all in the wash, you stay out of it. And if any water starts down while you're in it, get out in a hurry."

"O. K. Mommy."

So Stevie put on his sandals — there were too many stickers on the road to go barefoot—and went after Eddie. He tracked him carefully like Daddy showed him—all bent over—and only had to look twice to see him so he'd be sure to follow the right tracks. He finally tracked him down into the wash.

Burro Eddie was eating mesquite beans off a bush across the wash from The Dark. Stevie held out his hand and waggled his fingers at him.

"Come on, Eddie. Come on, old feller."

Eddie waggled his ears at Stevie and peeked out of the corner of his eyes, but he went on pulling at the

long beans, sticking his teeth way out so the thorns wouldn't scratch his lips so bad. Stevie walked slow and careful towards Eddie, making soft-talk real coaxing-like and was just sliding his hand up Eddie's shoulder to get hold of the ragged old rope around his neck when Eddie decided to be scared and jumped with all four feet. He skittered across to the other side of the wash, tumbling Stevie down on the rough, gravelly sand.

"Doggone you, Eddie!" he yelled, getting up, "You come on back here. We gotta get out of the wash. Mommy's gonna be mad at us. Don't be so mean!"

Stevie started after Eddie and Eddie kept on playing like he was scared. He flapped his stringy tail and tried to climb the almost straight-up-and-down bank of the wash. His front feet scrabbled at the bank and his hind feet kicked up the sand. Then he slid down on all fours and just stood there, his head pushed right up against the bank, not moving at all.

Stevie walked up to him real slow and started to take the old rope. Then he saw where Eddie was standing:

"Aw, Eddie," he said, squatting down in the sand. "Look what you went and did. You kicked all my magic away. You let The Dark get out. Now I haven't got anything Arnold hasn't got. Dern you, Eddie!" He stood up and smacked Ed-

die's flank with one hand. But Eddie just stood there and his flank felt funny—kinda stiff and cold.

"Eddie!" Stevie dragged on the rope and Eddie's head turned—jerky—like an old gate. Then Eddie's feet moved, but slow and funny, until Eddie was turned around.

"What's the matter, Eddie?" Stevie put his hand on Eddie's nose and looked at him close. Something was wrong with the burro's eyes. They were still big and dark, but now they didn't seem to see Stevie or anything—they looked empty. And while Stevie looked into them, there came a curling blackness into them, like smoke coming through a crack and all at once the eyes began to see again. Stevie started to back away, his hands going out in front of him.

"Eddie," he whispered. "Eddie, what's the matter?" And Eddie started after him—but not like Eddie—not with fast feet that kicked the sand in little spurts, but slow and awful, the two legs on one side together, then the two legs on the other side—like a sawhorse or something that wasn't used to four legs. Stevie's heart began to pound under his T shirt and he backed away faster. "Eddie, Eddie," he pleaded. "Don't, Eddie. Don't act like that. Be good. We gotta go back to the house."

BUT Eddie kept on coming, faster and faster, his legs getting looser so they worked better and his

eyes staring at Stevie. Stevie backed away until he ran into a big old cottonwood trunk that high water brought down after the last storm. He ducked around in back of the trunk. Eddie just kept on dragging his feet through the sand until he ran into the trunk too, but his feet kept on moving, even when he couldn't go any further. Stevie put out one shaky hand to pat Eddie's nose. But he jerked it back and stared and stared across the tree trunk at Eddie. And Eddie stared back with eyes that were wide and shiny like quiet lightning. Stevie swallowed dryness in his throat and then he knew.

"The Dark!" he whispered. "The Dark. It got out. It got in Eddie!"

He turned and started to run kitty-cornered across the wash. There was an awful scream from Eddie. Not a donkey scream at all, and Stevie looked back and saw Eddie—The Dark—coming after him, only his legs were working better now and his big mouth was wide open with the big yellow teeth all wet and shiny. The sand was sucking at Stevie's feet, making him stumble. He tripped over something and fell. He scrambled up again and his hands splashed as he scrambled. The run-off from the Whetstones was coming and Stevie was in the wash!

He could hear Eddie splashing behind him. Stevie looked back and screamed and ran for the bank. Eddie's face wasn't Eddie any more.

Eddie's mouth looked full of twisting darkness and Eddie's legs had learned how a donkey runs and Eddie could outrun Stevie any day of the week. The water was coming higher and he could feel it grab his feet and suck sand out from under him every step he took.

Somewhere far away he heard Mommy shrieking at him, "Stevie! Get out of the wash!"

Then Stevie was scrambling up the steep bank, the stickers getting in his hands and the fine silty dirt getting in his eyes. He could hear Eddie coming and he heard Mommy scream, "Eddie!" and there was Eddie trying to come up the bank after him, his mouth wide and slobbering.

Then Stevie got mad. "Dern you, old Dark!" he screamed. "You leave Eddie alone!" He was hanging onto the bushes with one hand but he dug into his pocket with the other and pulled out his pocket-piece. He looked down at it—his precious pocket-piece—two pieces of

popsicle stick tied together so they looked a little bit like an airplane, and on the top, lopsided and scraggly, the magic letters INRI. Stevie squeezed it tight, and then he screamed and threw it right down Eddie's throat—right into the swirling nasty blackness inside of Eddie.

There was an awful scream from Eddie and a big bursting roar and Stevie lost hold of the bush and fell down into the racing, roaring water. Then Mommy was there gathering him up, crying his name over and over as she waded to a low place in the bank, the water curling above her knees, making her stagger. Stevie hung on tight and cried, "Eddie! Eddie! That mean old Dark! He made me throw my pocket-piece away! Oh, Mommy, Mommy! Where's Eddie?"

And he and Mommy cried together in the stickery sand up on the bank of the wash while the flood waters roared and rumbled down to the river, sweeping the wash clean, from bank to bank.

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THE STRANGER

By

Gordon R. Dickson

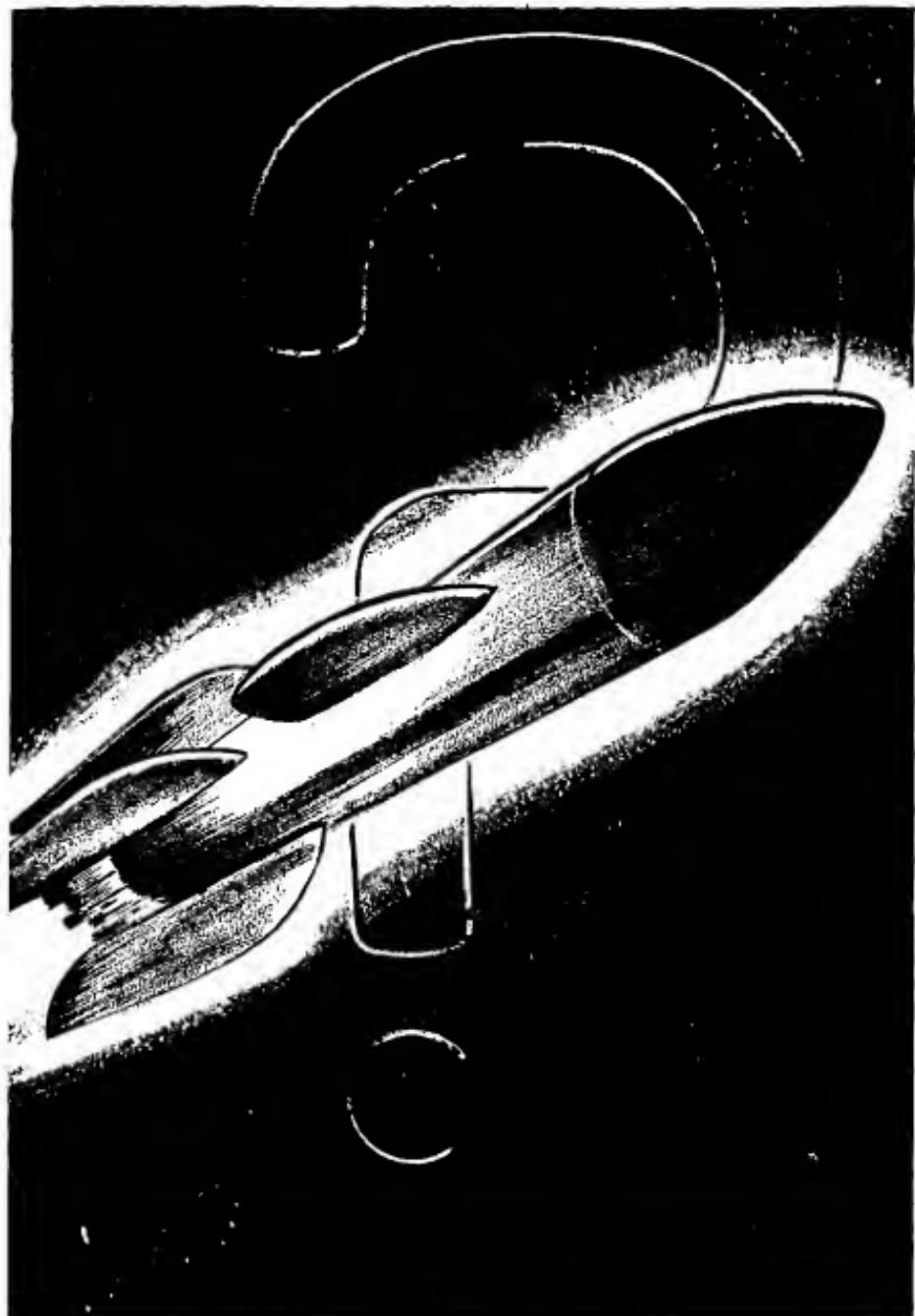
If the alien space craft was not a rocket ship, what was it? And an even bigger question: should they investigate — or run for their lives!

WE will not consider the odds involved in their finding the stranger, for the odds were impossible.

They came down to rest their tubes on an unnamed planet of a

little-known star in the Buckhorn Cluster. Because they were tired from weeks in space, they came in without looking. They circled the planet once and spiraled down to an open patch of sand between two





rocky cliffs. Only then did they see the other ship.

Jeff Wadley was at the controls and his eyes widened when he saw it. But his fingers did not hesitate on the controls, for a deep-space starship is not the kind of vehicle that can change its mind about landing once it is within half a mile of the ground. He brought the Emerald Girl in smoothly to a stop not five hundred feet from the stranger. Then he sat back.

"Dad," he said flatly, into the intercom, "swing the turret!"

Peter Wadley, up in the instrument room, had already seen the strange ship, and the heavy twin barrels of the automatic rifles were depressing to cover. Jeff leaned forward to the communicator.

"*Identify yourself!*" The tight beam in Common Code snapped across the little stretch of open sand to the cliff against which the other seemed to nestle. "We are the mining ship Emerald Girl, Earth license, five hundred and eighty-two days out of Arcturus Station. *Identify yourself!*"

There were steps behind Jeff, and Peter Wadley came to stand behind his son's tense back.

"Do they answer, Jeff?"

"No."

"*Identify yourself. Identify yourself! Identify yourself!*"

The angry demand crackled and arced invisibly across the space between both vessels. And there was no answer.

JEFF sat back from the communicator. The palms of his hands were wet and he wiped them on the cloth of his breeches.

"Let's get out of here," he said nervously.

"And leave *him*?" his father's lean forefinger indicated the strange silent ship.

"Why not?" Jeff jerked his face up. "We're no salvage outfit or Government exploration unit."

There was a moment of tenseness between them. The older man's face tightened.

"We'd better look into it," he said.

"Are you crazy?" blazed Jeff. "It was here when we came. It'll be here if we leave. Let's get going. We can report it if you want. Let the Federal ships investigate."

"Maybe it just landed," his father said evenly. "Maybe it's in trouble."

"What if it is?" Jeff insisted. "Don't you realize we're a sitting target here? And what do you think it is—Aunt Susie's runabout? Look at it!" And with a savage flip of his hand he shoved the magnification of the viewing screen up so that the other ship seemed to loom up a handsbreadth beyond their walls.

It was an unnecessary gesture. There was no mistaking that the lines of the other ship were foreign to any they had ever seen. It was big: not outlandishly big, but bigger than the Emerald Girl, and bulb-shaped with most of its bulk in front.

There was no sign of ports or air-locks, only a few stubby fins, which projected forlornly from the body at an angle of some thirty degrees.

And from its silence and immobility, its strange inhuman lines, a cold air of alien menace seemed to reach out to chill the two watching men.

"Well?" challenged Jeff. But the older man was not listening.

"The radarcamera," he said, half to himself. He turned on his heel and stalked off. Jeff, sitting tensely in his chair, heard his father's footsteps die away, to be succeeded seconds later by the distant clumsy sounds of a man getting into a space-suit. Jeff swore, and jumping to his feet, ran to the airlock. His father, radarcamera at his feet, was already half-dressed to go outside.

"You aren't going out there?" he asked incredulously.

THE older man nodded and picked up his fishbowl helmet. Jeff's face twisted in dismay.

"I won't let you!" he half-shouted. "You're risking your life and I can't navigate the ship without you."

Helmet in hand, his father paused, the deep-graved lines of his face stiffening.

"I'm still master of this ship!" he said curtly. "Alien or not that other ship may need assistance. By intraspace law I'm obliged to give it. If you're worried, cover me from the gun-turret." He dropped the helmet over his head, cutting Jeff off

from further protest.

Seething with mixed fear and anger, Jeff turned abruptly and climbed hurriedly to the gun turret. The twin barrels of the rifles were already centered on their target, which the aiming screen showed, together with the area between the two vessels and a portion of the Emerald Girl's airlock, which projected from her side. As Jeff watched, the outer lock swung open and a grey, space-suited figure raced for the protection of the bow. It was a dash of no more than five second's duration, but to Jeff it seemed that his father took an eternity to reach safety.

He reached for the microphone on the ship's circuit and pulled it to him.

"All right, Dad?" In spite of himself, Jeff's voice was still ragged with anger.

"Fine, Jeff," his father's voice came back in unperturbed tones. "I'm well shielded and I can get good, clean shots at every part of her."

"Let me know when you're ready to start back," said Jeff, and shoved the microphone away from him.

He sat back and lit a cigarette, but his eyes continued to watch the other ship as a man might watch a dud bomb which has not yet been disarmed. After a while, he noticed his fingers were shaking, and he laid the cigarette carefully down in the ashtray.

When he comes back, thought Jeff, it'll be time. We'll have this

thing out then. He's become some sort of a religious fanatic, and he doesn't know it. How a man who's been all over hell and seen the worst sides of fifty different races in as many years can think of them all as lovable human children, I don't know. But, know it or not, this taking of chances has got to stop someplace; and right here is the best place of all. When he gets back—if he gets back, we're taking off. And if he doesn't get back . . . I'll blow that bloody bastard over there into so many bits . . .

"Coming in, Jeff," his father's voice on the speaker interrupted him.

JEFF leaned forward, his hands on the trips of the rifles; the small grey figure suddenly shot back to the protection of the airlock, which snapped shut behind it. Then, he took a deep breath, stood up, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He went down to the instrument room.

Peter Wadley was already out of his suit and developing the pictures. Jeff picked them up as they came off the role, damp and soft to the touch.

"I can't tell much," he said, holding them up to the light.

"There's a great deal of overlap," his father answered. "We're going to have to section and fit the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. Wait'll I'm through here."

For about five minutes more, pictures continued to come off the roll.

Then Peter picked up a pair of scissors and arranged the prints in their proper sequence.

"Clear the table," he told Jeff, "and fit these together as I hand them to you."

For a little while longer, they worked in silence. Then Peter laid down his scissors.

"That's all," he said. "Now, what have we got?"

"I don't know," answered Jeff, bewilderment in his voice. "It looks like nothing I've ever seen."

Peter stepped up to the table and squinted at the shadowy films with eyes practiced in reading rock formations. He shook his head.

"It is strange," he said, finally.

"Do you see what I see?" demanded Jeff. "There's no real crew space. There's this one spot — up front—" he indicated it with his finger—"that's about as big as a good sized closet. And nothing more than that—except corridors about twenty inches in diameter running from it to points all over the ship. She must be flown by a crew of midgets."

"Midgets," echoed the older man, thoughtfully. "I never heard of an intelligent race that small."

"Then they're something new," said Jeff, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"No," said his father, slowly. "I don't remember when or where I heard it, but there's some reason why you couldn't have an intelligent race much smaller than a good sized dog."

It has some thing to do with the fact that they grow in size as their developing intelligence gives them an increasing advantage over their environment."

"Here's the evidence," Jeff answered, tapping the film with one finger.

"No," Pete was bending over the picture fragments again. "Look at these things in the corridor. They're obviously controls."

Jeff looked.

"I see what you mean," he said at last. "If there's any similarity between their mechanical system and ours, these controls are built for somebody pretty big. But look how they're scattered all over the ship. There's a good fifteen or twenty different groups of instruments and other things. That means a number of crew members; and you simply can't put a number of large crew members in those little corridors."

"There's a large amount of total space," Pete began. Then, suddenly a faint tremor ran through the ship. Jeff leaped for the screen and his father moved over to stand behind him.

"Good Lord," said Jeff, "look at her."

THE other ship shook suddenly and rolled slightly to one side. Some unseen center of gravity pulled her back to her original position. She hesitated a moment, and then tried again, with the same results. She lay quiescent.

Jeff pounced on his radiation drum graph.

"What does it say?" Peter asked.

Jeff shook his head in astonishment. "Nothing," he answered, "just nothing at all."

"Nothing?" Peter came over to take a look at the graph himself. It was as Jeff had said. The line tracing the white surface of the graph was straight and undisturbed.

"But that's impossible," Peter frowned.

The two men turned back to the screen. As they watched, one final shudder shook the strange ship, and then, like a stranded whale who has given up hope, it lay still.

"My God!" said Pete, and Jeff turned to him in astonishment. It was the closest to profanity his father had come in twenty years. "Jeff, do you know what I think? I think that ship is manned by just one great big creature—like a giant squid. That's why no radiation registered. He was trying to move his ship by sheer strength."

Jeff stared at his father.

"You're crazy," was all he could manage to say. "Why, something big enough to shake that ship would have to fill every inch of space inside it. You can't live in a space ship that way."

"That's right," Pete answered. He clamped his hand on Jeff's shoulder excitedly and led him back to the jigsaw puzzle on the table.

"If I'm right," he said, "that's no ship at all as we understand it, but

some sort of a space-going suit for something terrifically large. Something like a giant squid, as I said. or some other long-tentacled creature. His body would lie here—in this space you said was about the size of a closet—and his tentacles or whatever they are, would reach out in these corridors to the various groups of instruments."

Jeff frowned.

"It sounds sensible," he muttered. "And in any case, he wouldn't be able to get outside his ship to fix anything that went wrong. And I take it there is something wrong, or else he wouldn't be jumping around inside."

"Jeff," Pete said, "I'm going outside to take a close look at him."

Jeff's head snapped up from the jigsaw puzzle. The old, sick fear had come back. It washed over him like a wave.

"Why?" he demanded harshly.

"To see if I can find out what's wrong with his ship," said Pete over his shoulder as he went to the airlock. "Coming?"

"Wait!" cried Jeff. He stood up and followed his father. For a moment there, they stood facing each other, two tall men with less apparent physical difference between them than their ages might indicate, poised on the brink of an open break.

"Wait," said Jeff again, and now his voice was lower, more under control. "Dad, there's no point in playing around any longer.

You aren't going to be satisfied just to look around out there and then leave. You're going to do something. And if that's it I want to know now."

THREE

HERE was a moment's silence; then Pete turned back to Jeff, his face set.

"That's right," he said. "I don't have to look. I know what's wrong. And I know what I'm going to do about it. There's a living intelligence trapped in that space-thing as you and I might be trapped. I can set it free with two of our motor jacks. If you've got one inkling of what it means to be ignored when you're caught like that, you'll help me. If not, I'm taking two jacks out the airlock and you can fire the motors and take off and be damned to you."

Between the two big men the tension built and strained and broke. Jeff let out a ragged sigh.

"All right," he said. "I'm with you."

"Good," said the older man, and there was new life in his voice. "Get your suit on. I'll explain as we dress.

"The trouble with our friend there is that he's fallen over. I see you don't understand, Jeff. Well, this ship of ours lands on her belly. We've got booster rockets all over the hull to correct our landing angle. But ships *weren't* always that way. They used to have to sit down on their tail. There's no furrow where that ship landed, only a circular blasted spot, so it figures.

Maybe some of his mechanism went wrong at the last minute.

"At any rate, I'm betting that if we get him upright again, he can take care of himself from there on out. So you and I are going to go out there with a couple of jacks and see if we can't jack him back up into position."

THE sand was thick and heavy.

The walk over to the other ship was tedious, with the heavy jacks weighing them down. They reached the alien hull, paused a moment to get their breath and then attached the magnetic grapples to the skin of the ship at two points on opposite sides of the hull and roughly a fourth of the way up from the rocket tubes.

It was hard to anchor the jacks in the soft sand. They finally found it necessary to dig them in some three or four feet to a layer of rock that underlay the sand. Then, when everything was ready, they took their stations, each at a jack, and Pete called to Jeff on the helmet set.

"All ready? Start your motor."

Jeff reached down and flicked a switch. The tiny, powerful jack motor began to spin, and the jack base settled more solidly against its rocky bed. When he was sure that it would not slip, he left it, and went around the rockets to stand by his father.

His face was grey.

"Well," said Pete tensely, "up she goes."

The nose of the alien ship was raising slowly from the sand. It quivered softly from some motion inside the ship.

"Yes," said Jeff, "up she goes." His words were flat and dull. Pete turned to look at him.

"Scared, son?" he asked. Jeff's lips parted, closed and opened again.

"You know how we stand," he said, dully. "I've heard what you said from other men, but never from an alien. Most of the ones we know hit first, and talk afterward. You know that once this ship is on its feet we're at his mercy. Just his rocket blasts alone could kill us; and there won't be time to get back to the Girl."

The alien was now at an angle of forty-five degrees. The little jacks stretched steadily, pushing their thin, stiff arms against the strange hull. Sand dripped from the rising ship.

"Yes, Jeff," Pete said. "I know. But the important thing isn't what he does, but what we do. The fact that we've helped him — can't you see it that way, son?"

Jeff shook his head in bewilderment.

"I don't know," he said helplessly. "I just don't know."

The ship was now nearly upright. Suddenly, with an abruptness that startled both men, it shook itself free of the jacks and teetered free for a second, before coming to rest, its nose pointing straight up.

"Here it goes," said Pete, a tinge

of excitement in his voice. They moved back some yards to be out of the way of the takeoff blast. Suddenly the ground trembled under their feet. Pete put his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Here it goes," he repeated, in a whisper.

Flame burst abruptly from the base of the ship. It was warming up its tubes. Slowly the flame puffed out from its base and it began to rise.

JEFF shook suddenly with an uncontrollable shudder. His voice came to Pete through the earphones, starkly afraid.

"Now what?" he cried. "What'll he do now?"

Pete's grip tightened on his shoulder.

"Steady boy."

The ship was rising. Up it went, and up, until it was the size of a man's little finger, a tiny sliver of silver against the black backdrop of the sky. Then, inexplicably, it halted and began to reverse itself.

Slowly it turned, until the blunt nose pointed toward them. Jeff's hoarse breathing was loud in his helmet. *Now it comes*, he thought, and his muscles tensed.

A long minute flowed by and still the alien hung there. Then, abruptly it went into a series of idiotic gyrations; it twisted and turned, and spun around, swinging its fiery trail of rocket gases like a luminous tail in the darkness.

Then, just as abruptly, it reversed once more, so that its head was away from them; in the twinkling of a moment it was gone.

Pete sighed, a deep, ragged sigh.

"Did you see it, boy?" he cried. "Did you see it?"

"I saw," Jeff's voice was filled with a new awe. "Now I get it. He wasn't sure—he didn't know we were really trying to help him until we let him get all the way out there by himself. Then he knew he was free. That's why he wouldn't answer before."

"Sure, Jeff, sure," said the older man, a note of triumph in his voice. "But that's not what I mean. Did you notice all those contortions he was going through up there? What did they remind you of?"

There was a moment of silence, then the words came, at first slowly, then in a rush from Jeff's lips.

"Like a puppy," he said, haltingly, stumbling over the wonder of it. "Like a puppy wagging its tail."

And the light of a new understanding broke suddenly in his eyes.

"Dad!" said Jeff, turning to his father. "Dad! Do you know what I think? I think we've made a friend."

And the two men stood there, side by side, looking into the blackness of space where an odd-shaped space-craft had vanished. It, they felt, was on its way home.

And they were right. Moreover, It was hurrying.

For It had a story to tell.

SURVIVORS

by

Arthur Dekker Savage

**When man embarks upon the final atomic war
his civilization may be destroyed; yet, there will
be survivors. Would you want to be one of them? . . .**

“O LUF!”

“Bowron!”

They recognized each other simultaneously, there in the thin fringe of tangled brush skirting a hidden lake.

“Oluf, it’s good to see you again—I thought there was nothing but mountains, wolves and Wild Ones between me and civilization!” They picked their way slowly toward the shore together.

Oluf dropped gratefully to the warm sand. The sunset highlighted his reddish hair. “You’re not far wrong—there was wolf spoor back on that north ridge. But what in the name of the Moon are you doing so far from New York?”

“Heading south, to stay,” Bowron said. He scanned the brush and trees behind them cautiously, then stretched out beside his companion, sighing. “I’m getting too old for the winters, and the canned foods in the ruins are getting scarcer every year.”

Oluf looked at him in disbelief.

“You’re traveling alone?”

“Aren’t you?” The retort was sharp, with the keen edge of elderly pride.

Something like a weary chuckle sounded deep in Oluf’s throat. He spoke with easy candor. “Yes, but—look, Bowron, I’m a hunter by choice. And I’m big and in my prime. I can run half a day at top speed, and I’m not too bad in a free-for-all. You’re a teacher—wise, but not in the ways of the wilds; your senses are dull and your reactions slow, like all city folk.”

Bowron’s eyes looked suddenly tired, older. He gazed out over the placid water. “I could persuade no one to accompany me,” he said simply. “You made a good choice, Oluf, to terminate your education and seek the freedom of the wilds—the natural life that I think all must someday embrace.” He sighed deeply. “Of course, there is the dream of achievement that the city dwellers entertain. We’ve grown

soft in our dependence upon the buried food in the rubble—spending our time in study of the books and other god-things, always hoping that we can understand and duplicate the old civilization. But our best thinkers, since they are the most eager searchers, stumble most often into the hidden pockets of radioactivity that endure even yet; and they die, and their knowledge dies with them, and our dreams and aspirations become dimmer with each generation."

OLUF grunted, and Bowron went on as though to himself. "I've come to believe that it's useless to follow in the footsteps of the gods—that we must wait, and think, and work, each in his own way, until we learn what is possible for us through our own trials and the further development of our simple tools. We've learned much from the god-things, slowly, over the years. But we also know that we're mutants, changed by the radiation of the great war areas, breeding true at last, and that we are different from the Wild Ones. True, we're superior, but—we're not gods. Whether we can ever—"

Oluf had sprung to his feet and was gone with incredible speed. Bowron sat up tensely, listened to the crashing of brush, and, finally, to a shrill squeal of departing life. He relaxed and waited until Oluf, grinning, returned with a rabbit.

"Our dinner, old-timer. Sorry I wasn't listening too closely to what

you were saying."

Later, after they had eaten and were stretched comfortably on the moon-drenched shore, Oluf grew reminiscent. "I remember your teachings, Bowron. And I recall well our endless attempts to operate the god-things—the machines and mechanisms. But all that always seemed strange. Best of all I liked the tales of the old days—the stories of our ancestors."

Bowron nodded thoughtfully. "It was that way with most of my pupils. It was more comfortable to dream of the past than to cope with the current hardships. It seemed to arouse some dormant instinct in all of us—" He broke off and sighed. "Would you like to hear another of the stories?"

"Very much!"

Bowron studied the bright moon. "Well—once in the far and long ago, there was a man named Smith, who lived in a big city . . ."

When the tale was done, Oluf seemed deeply moved. "I believe," he said slowly, "that I'll go with you to the Southland. You might easily perish on the way, and such words as yours must live to give others comfort and hope — for we may yet find living gods in some remote corner of the world. It must have been wonderful," he mused sleepily, "to have lived in companionship with the gods—with men." He curled up comfortably, paws tucked in, and laid his nose across his bushy tail.

THE END

DESTINY UNCERTAIN

By Rog Phillips

Is Fate a robot typing out the destiny of the world? Lin knew it was true so with his own future at stake — he stole a page from history!

“I’m never going to take my last breath,” Lin said with a gloating tone that implied some deep secret. He waited until his remark had had its full dramatic moment, then added, “I’m simply

going to take my next to last breath and hold it.”

Jerry Myer’s voice emerged from the wave of laughter, serious. “But there does often seem to be something predestined about death. Even





seemingly accidental death." He shuddered. "There were five hundred and sixty-nine traffic deaths last Labor Day weekend. I wonder how those victims would have felt if they had been told, say, a week before they died? And been unable to avoid it, no matter what they did?"

"Nonsense!" Phil Arnoff said. "What about surgery, serums, and safety devices? They get demonstrable results in saving lives. A man has an enlarged aorta. Ten years ago he would have been a goner. Today he has an operation. They transplant a section of the aorta of a dead person, and he lives another twenty years."

Jerry sighed. "You're getting into a meaningless argument. It could be answered that destiny brought the operation into the realm of actuality to save him *because it wasn't his time to die*. There's a lot of evidence to support predestination. Some of the oldest of philosophies and religions are based on it. *It is written* is a concept as old as man."

"And maybe as mistaken as the ancient belief in a god of thunder," Lin scoffed.

"And maybe not," Jerry said. "You read a book. Unless you cheat and look at the ending first it's like life. Unpredictable. But you *can* skip to the end and see how it will come out, and then start in at the beginning and read with that knowledge. And when you again reach the end it's still the same,

because it was already written and unchangeable when you began reading the first page. Sometimes I think real life is like that."

Phil and Lin winked at each other. Then Phil said, "Let's suppose that's true for the moment. Who does the writing?"

Jerry shrugged. "What difference would that make? There's the old tale of the Fates as weavers, weaving a cloth that becomes the events of men's lives as it is woven. And there's another one I heard once, or read someplace . . ."

"What's that?" Lin prodded.

"I was trying to remember where I got it," Jerry said. "It doesn't matter. The way it goes, Fate is an old man with sightless eyes, sitting at a typewriter, pecking out the events that will happen. Beside him is a wastebasket affair with an eternal flame in it. When the sightless old man finishes one page he yanks it out and drops it in the wastebasket. The flame consumes it, and as it is consumed it becomes the reality of life."

"Say!" Phil said. "That's a darned cute idea. Writing on paper, burning, and in the process of burning it transforms into reality by some strange alchemy. I hope you can remember where you read that."

Lin snorted. "Maybe he wrote it himself and burned the pages as they were finished," he suggested. He glanced at the clock on the wall. His eyes widened in surprise. "I didn't know it was that late,"

he said, rising. "I've got to get to the city before the bank closes. Have to really step on it."

"Take it easy," Phil called after him. "Don't get killed."

"Nothing to worry about," Lin called back. "If it isn't written it won't happen, you know."

"Don't tempt Fate!" Jerry said warningly.

But Lin was out the door beyond hearing.

THE sign read SLOW TO 35. Lin smiled. That was for ordinary cars. His Hudson had a low center of gravity. But he took his foot off the gas and the uphill drag slowed his car to seventy, sixty-five, sixty, then fifty-five as he entered the first bend of the S curve.

The pines were tall right to the edge of the shoulder, hiding what was ahead. It was a bad gamble, he decided, but the dashboard clock told him it was one he would have to take. Twenty-four miles to go yet and in twenty-two minutes. Even fifty-five was going to make him late. He edged up to fifty-eight, leaning his head over so he could see farther around the bend of the two lane highway.

A car was coming toward him. It was over on its side of the pavement, which was well. There was a woman in it. The color and shape of the hat, which was about all he could really see, told him that.

The oncoming car vanished for a moment on the curve. Then it

was rushing toward him on the short stretch of straightaway between the two curved sections of the S.

Lin relaxed. There wasn't a thing to worry about. He'd taken the first curve easily. The oncoming car was thirty yards away, then ten. Then—

It was one of those absolutely incredible instants of time. Something had happened to his Hudson. A blowout? A wheel off? Whatever it was, he had veered straight toward the oncoming car.

Instinctively he turned his wheel to get back into his own lane. The car responded by lifting into the air and turning over.

There was a brief, photographic still picture of the other car poised at a crazy angle scant inches in front of him. He could see the girl's features clearly, etched in lines of horror. She was nice looking. Her eyes were wide blue pools, and there were two sharp vertical lines between them.

She looked at him then, accusingly, reproachfully. He shook his head in mute apology and wished he could do it over and go slower.

Quite calmly, though, he knew they would probably both be killed. And it was strange that time could speed up so quickly in the moment before death. Even now, in this instant that hung poised in eternity he could find time left to wonder what had happened. It couldn't have been a tire. All four tires were less than five thousand miles old.

It couldn't have been a wheel either.

It could have been something in the road. He had been looking at the female hat behind the windshield of that car and could have missed seeing something on the road.

Forgetting what was in front of him, he started to turn his head to look back.

* * *

HE blinked his eyes. There was something wrong. It came to him. He had been about to have a head-on collision with another car. He looked down at the ground where he stood. His feet were resting on a well packed dirt path that went forward across the grass and curved behind a clump of large leaved shade trees.

He looked around him. No one was in sight. The place was strange to him. He'd never been here before.

He closed his eyes and thought back. He was quite certain he had been about to be killed in an accident. It couldn't have been a dream. He opened his eyes again and looked about him curiously. This could be a dream. Or was he dead and was this something after life?

There was a test he could make. He tried to remember having reached this point on the path. He turned around and looked back the way it came up the gentle slope of the hill. He couldn't remember having reached this spot at all.

There was another test. He used

the edge of his shoe to scrape a line on the path. Then he got down on his haunches and studied the ground. There was no sign of his footsteps. But the ground was well packed.

He straightened up. There was no use just standing here, he decided. So he started walking, the way he had been facing originally.

Suddenly he thought of another test. Stopping, he went through his pockets. Everything was where it should be. His billfold held his identification cards and currency. He studied the currency. It was too perfect in detail to be a figment of a dream.

He shook his head in perplexity. Whatever had happened, it was beyond his grasp. Shoving things back in his pockets he started forward again.

The sky was blue, with billowing white clouds drifting lazily high above the treetops. Ahead there was the sound of water. Shortly he came to a foot bridge that spanned a small and turbulent stream.

THE path followed the bank of the stream for a hundred yards, then turned sharply and cut through the woods. The trees seemed to be some kind of Maple. The ground was covered with short cropped meadow, as though cattle had grazed here. But there was no sign of movement anywhere.

But there was. Something small and black was drifting down toward

him in the air. He stopped and waited until he could reach out and seize it between his fingers.

It crumpled at his touch. He rubbed it between thumb and finger, examining its texture. It seemed to be a flake of burnt paper, as though someone had tossed a piece of paper in a campfire, and a charred piece of it had floated away on the breeze.

He went forward more eagerly now. Undoubtedly someone was ahead of him. Probably on a picnic. He could find out from them where he was.

And there was a sensible explanation of things now. He had probably been thrown clear of the car and knocked out. That could have lasted for hours while he wandered through the woods.

Of course that was it, he decided with relief. Now all he had to do was find someone and tell them about it, and they would take him back to the scene of the accident.

Ahead through the trees he could see the steep bank of a tableland that rose above the treetops. While he watched, there was a flurry of motion that swept downward from up there. Black flakes that turned and tossed in the breeze. More charred bits of paper. That was obviously where the campfire was.

"Hello up there!" he called. There was no answer. No sound at all.

He broke into a trot, marvelling that he didn't feel groggy or upset. The path turned in toward the steep

bank and terminated at the foot of concrete steps that went upward. When he reached them he paused to get his breath, then started up the steps at a more leisurely pace.

They zigzagged up the face of the steep bank, twelve steps to each section.

He paused half way up and looked over the treetops, which sloped gently for several hundred yards, then dropped away. In the far distance was the hazy panorama of a valley with two lakes that were irregular blue splotches on a carpet of greens and browns.

He resumed his upward climb. Finally there was only one more section of steps before the top.

HE sighed with relief and paused to look downward, almost regretting that he hadn't chosen to go the other way on the path. He would almost certainly have run into someone before this, going the other way, and then he wouldn't have had all this climb. But . . . He shrugged and climbed the last of the steps.

He was on a flat table of jigsaw design, flagstone cemented together. Twenty feet away was a man. The man, his back to him, was seated on a stone bench before a small stone table, intent on something he was doing that was concealed by his back and hunched shoulders.

In the incredible stillness came the staccato click of what sounded exactly like typewriter keys. As Lin

watched, the man jerked something. A piece of paper appeared briefly, then was dropped into a wire basket where almost invisible blue flames immediately licked at it and began to consume it.

Blackened bits floated upward and away. And even as they floated over the edge of the table the rapid click of the typewriter began again.

"Hello!" Lin said in good natured greeting.

The head didn't turn. The clack of the typewriter continued without pause.

Lin hesitated a moment, then approached the man slowly, debating whether he should speak to him again or wait until he paused to rest. The man must not be doing so well with his writing, to toss a finished page into the fire so casually.

Lin's lips quirked into a smile. He would sneak up and glance over the man's shoulder and read what he was typing.

As he stole forward he studied what he could see of the man. Instead of conventional attire he was wearing what seemed to be a heavy gray robe. If he had any hair it was concealed under the black skull cap he was wearing. The back of his neck was deeply wrinkled like that of a man well past the prime of life. His ears were well formed, but stuck out a trifle too much. And from the speed at which he was typing he was probably completely unaware of his surroundings.

Lin paused above him and admired the typewriter. It was the most beautiful machine he had ever seen, and electric, he decided as the man's fingers touched a key and the carriage swung back to starting position on a new line.

THE type on the paper wasn't standard. In fact, some of it didn't even seem to be ordinary letters, but some strange type of symbols. Others were almost ordinary.

Lin leaned forward cautiously in order to make out what was already typed. He saw only two words that were recognizable. One was *force* in the middle of the second line. The other was *late* in the line that had just been written.

It was a foreign language, Lin decided. But the two words he could recognize gave no clue to what language it might be.

The page was finished. The man's hand seized it and jerked it from the machine, dropping it into the flame in the wire wastebasket.

And from some automatic feed a new sheet came into view on the platen, and the man continued his typing, his fingers moving with great rapidity and without letup.

Lin straightened and stepped back a bit so as not to startle the man. He coughed loudly and said, "Hello, there."

The rhythm of the man's typing didn't vary. He gave no indication of having heard.

Slightly annoyed, Lin reached out

and tapped him firmly on the shoulder. Still no result.

"Hey there!" Lin shouted, clamping fingers over the man's shoulders and starting to shake him. "Hey!" he started to say again, then his voice died away.

The shoulder under his fingers was unyielding. Too unyielding. His lips took on a stubborn line. He applied force. The shoulder was immovable.

He released it and stared down, mystified. The fingers continued their typing without pause, a blur of movement over the keys.

With abrupt decision Lin stepped around so he could see the man's face. He caught an impression of a lean face, intellectual and relaxed, with firm lips and thin high bridged nose. But these were only vaguely noticed, because his attention was immediately dominated by the man's eyes.

Or lack of eyes, that is. For where his eyes should have been was nothing but tightly closed lids that, from their sunken contours, covered no eyes at all, but only empty sockets.

EXPERIMENTALLY Lin reached out and touched the face. The pale skin was as unyielding as rock. He pressed his finger against the right cheek until his nail bent over. It should have left a mark on any living skin and brought an exclamation of pain from any living person. But it left no perceptible

mark, and the man gave no sign of having noticed. And the fingers continued their rapid movement over the typewriter keyboard.

Incredulously Lin reached out and tried to remove the skullcap. It wouldn't budge, and was as unyieldingly hard as the face.

"A robot!" The exclamation escaped Lin's lips in a hoarse whisper. "Or—a statue?"

In desperation he seized one of the man's arms at the elbow and tried to interrupt the smooth flow of movement. All his strength couldn't vary the motion of that arm enough to cause a finger to miss a key on the typewriter.

"Not a millionth of an inch of play in the joints!" he said, marvelling.

For the first time he turned his attention from the figure before him and examined his surroundings. The robot or statue or whatever it was was seated at a spot practically perched on the edge of a cliff that went down much farther than the stairs on the other side. Here there was a sheer drop of at least a thousand feet, and probably more nearly two thousand.

Below, an immense valley stretched out toward the far horizon.

Lin looked out over the valley with a puzzled frown, trying to recall if there were any high mountains in this section of the country. There were hills, but no real mountains. Nothing to compare with this.

"How long have I been uncons-

cious?" he muttered.

His attention jerked back to the typist in time to see another sheet of paper go into the flames. He watched it burn. The flame itself seemed to come out of a round hole in the rock inside the area of the bottom of the wire basket. From its color it was a gas flame. In the dark it would be a bright blue.

His attention turned to the typewriter and the stone table on which it rested. An inscription was embossed on the smooth face of the front of the table.

Lin nodded in grim understanding. This was a statue. But a statue such as never had existed on the Earth he lived in, or it would have been considered the eighth wonder of the world and known to every school child.

An urgency possessed him to seize the next sheet of paper before the flame could get it, and try to read it. He waited while the robot statue typed, and when the hand jerked out the sheet to throw it into the flames, he grabbed it, though part of it tore away and dropped into the flame before he could rescue it.

He examined the texture of the paper. It had the feel of plastic more than paper. He studied the typing. It was sharp and clear, and completely unintelligible.

Or was it unintelligible? He could almost make sense out of the words. Some of the letters that had been strange were taking on a feel of familiarity.

HE closed his eyes tightly and shook his head, then opened them and looked again. It did make sense, but the sense was just beyond his reach.

He looked at the figure bent over the typewriter again, and it struck a chord of familiarity somewhere in his mind. He had heard of this statue somewhere . . .

He remembered now! This statue, or whatever it was, was the embodiment of Fate. It was writing all that was in store for each individual, and when it tossed the sheets that were written on in the flame their burning brought what was written into being, and it happened somewhere, just as it had been written.

He stared at the fragment of paper he held in his hand, and wondered what was written on it, and what events he was holding up by not tossing the sheet in the flame.

A smile curved his lips. He held it over the basket. By releasing it, it would drop down and burn. Then whatever event he was holding up would happen.

His fingers relaxed. The paper slipped a fraction of an inch. Suddenly he clutched it tightly and drew it to safety. His forehead prickled. Beads of perspiration dampened it. This puzzled him. It was almost as though somewhere in his mind was terrible anxiety. But he was quite calm.

He stared at the torn sheet of

paper again, the smile playing about his lips. Slowly and deliberately he folded it and, taking out his billfold, stored it safely away.

He took a last look at the silent robot, the clicking typewriter, then crossed the tablerock to the stairs and went down them to the path.

Again he saw no sign of movement except for the occasional bit of floating charred paper that came from above. He recrossed the stream at the footbridge. He went slower then, looking for the mark he had made in the hard packed path with the edge of his shoe.

He nearly missed it, seeing it only as he stepped over it. Stopping, he turned and looked back the way he had come. Ahead were the broad leaved trees that looked so much like Maples, the path over which he had come.

He started to turn—and the world turned topsy turvy around him. There was the white face of the girl through the windshield of a car, dropping away suddenly and rotating in a mad gyration until the face was upside down, and then was gone past him.

A dull booming sound exploded on his bewildered mind. Wild forces were tossing him about inside the car so rapidly that there was no way to tell which was up and which was down.

As abruptly as it began, it ended. In the dead silence he heard the screech of brakes. He wondered if it was the girl stopping her

car to come back, but he didn't turn his head to look.

He was trying to reconcile the sequence of events brought by his senses. It was impossible. He had spent at least two hours walking up that path, watching the robot statue, and walking back down again to where he had first appeared.

Yet, if it had happened at all, it had happened in less than a split second, for events in the collision had taken up *at the exact point where they had left off*.

HE opened his eyes and saw the creamy gloss surface of a ceiling and knew at once he was in a hospital. Without moving his head he let his fingers explore the clean smelling sheets, the hospital bed gown tied around his neck.

A footstep sounded. A nurse looked down at him with a quiet smile. "Feel all right?" she asked.

He dipped his head in an almost imperceptible nod. The nurse went away. There was a swish of wind as the door closed behind her, but he didn't bother to turn his head to look.

After several minutes the swish of the door sounded again. More than one pair of footsteps came toward the bed. Two men, probably doctors, looked down at him.

"How's the patient today?" one of them asked.

"Today?" Lin echoed. "How long have I been here?"

"Almost a week."

It came flooding in. He could remember hours of torturous pain during which he cried for them to put him out of his misery, of at least two terrible nightmarish scenes where he was surrounded by gleaming chrome things, and the awful odor of ether.

"I remember now," he said weakly. "Will—will I live?"

"If you'd asked us that yesterday we'd have said no," the doctor said, "but—" He shrugged.

"How badly am I hurt?" Lin asked the doctors.

"Pretty badly," one of them said with grave frankness. "Broken back. Severed spine. If you live you'll never walk again."

"But I probably won't live?" Lin said.

The doctors didn't reply.

"The girl," Lin said, "the one who was driving the other car? Was she hurt?"

"Yes. Pretty badly. But she'll live."

"What's her name?"

The two doctors looked at each other. One of them said, "I believe she gave her name as Dorothy Lake."

"Tell me, what was it that caused my car to go out of control?" Lin asked suddenly.

"I can tell you that," one of the doctors said. "The mechanic reported that your tierod, the rod that connects the front wheels together so they stay in line, had

come off one of its moorings."

"Oh," Lin said vaguely. He was beginning to feel strange. The memory of that interlude atop the mountain had come back. He was remembering that bit of paper he had snatched from the flames. But of course there was nothing in that . . . "Are my things here?" he asked abruptly. "My billfold?"

"Yes," the nurse said. "Your billfold is in the drawer here."

"Get it," Lin said.

She opened the drawer and brought out the billfold.

"Open it and see if there's a folded piece of paper that's torn off on one corner," he demanded.

He watched while she explored the contents. He recognized the texture of the paper as it came to view. "That's it!" he said tensely. "Give it to me!"

He tried to lift an arm. He had to be content with taking it in his fingers while his elbows rested on the bed. With shaking fingers he opened it, and saw the typing that was so different from ordinary typing.

His fingers no longer shook. He folded the sheet of paper and handed it back. "Don't put it back in my billfold," he said. "I want you to take that down to the hospital office and have them put it in an envelope and lock it in the safe. Do you understand? I want that taken care of as though it were worth a million dollars. I don't want anything to happen to it. Do

you understand?"

"Y-yes," she said. "I'll do that."

Lin watched her leave the room, then turned with a grin to the doctors.

"I'll live," he said confidently. "I'll live. *Nothing* can kill me now—so long as that sheet of paper remains intact."

He didn't mind at all the way the two men looked at each other with lifted eyebrows.

THE door swished open. The nurse came in. "There's a man down in the waiting room who wants to see you, Mr. Grant," she said. "He gave his name as Hugo Fairchild."

Lin frowned. "You sure he wants to see me?" he asked. "I don't know anyone by that name."

"Yes, it's you," the nurse said. "I told him you weren't in any shape to see any visitors, but he said he would take only a moment of your time."

"All right," Lin sighed. "Send him up, but make sure he doesn't stay any longer than that."

Lin examined the man the nurse brought in. He was of medium height and of ordinary appearance. A type that wouldn't attract a second glance on the street or anywhere else.

"I'm Hugo Fairchild," the man said. "You're Lin Grant."

"That's right," Lin said.

Fairchild looked down at Lin for a moment, then said abruptly,

"I'll come straight to the point. You have a piece of paper that doesn't belong to you. I've come to get it."

Lin's eyes narrowed. "How did you know about it, and why do you want it?"

"There's no need to ask questions," Fairchild said. "I'm here to get that piece of paper. It's of no importance to you."

"You can't have it," Lin said.

Fairchild looked around quickly. "We're alone," he said rapidly. "I could knock you out with one blow of my fist. If you won't make any outcry I'll just take it out of your billfold and leave."

Lin watched, grinning, as Fairchild opened the drawer and took out the billfold and searched it swiftly. When he saw it wasn't there he tossed the billfold back in the drawer and looked grimly at Lin. "Where is it?"

"You think I don't know the value of that bit of paper?" Lin said. "You'll never get it. But you interest me. How did you get here? You know what I mean."

"Look, Lin Grant," Fairchild said. "I'm desperate. I have to have that paper. It means nothing to you. Please let me have it."

"Means nothing to me?" Lin said, his voice soft and mocking. "If I hadn't snatched that paper from the fire I would be dead right now. You know that. And *so long as I keep it nothing can ever kill me*. That's why you'll never get it."

"You're insane," Fairchild said. "How could a mere piece of paper have that power? It has no meaning whatever. The writing on it is merely nonsense."

"Then why are you so interested in getting it to put into the flame?" Lin said. "If you hadn't shown up I might in time have rationalized my memories some way and torn the thing up. But not now. Your coming after it convinces me I'm right. You'll never get it!"

"If I don't," Fairchild said, tight-lipped, "you'll regret every minute you keep it. You're wrong about it. It has nothing to do with you at all." His voice became pleading. "Give it to me and I promise you that you will recover completely as though you were never in a wreck. The doctors can tell you how much of a 'miracle' that will be."

Lin shook his head. "There's more to this than mere superstition or fantastic miracles," he said. "I'll never give up that paper until I know what it means and what it's all about. I know, I should have died. I don't have anything to lose, whatever I do. So I'm keeping it."

"You'll regret it," Fairchild said. He turned abruptly to the door just as the nurse came in. "I was just going," he said calmly.

THAT night Lin slept, and in the morning when he awakened a nurse was bringing in his breakfast tray. "Good morning!" she said brightly.

Lin yawned and stretched a vague, "Mornin'" coming from his wide open mouth.

The nurse placed the tray where he could reach it easily, and started to leave the room. At the door she stopped abruptly and gasped, then turned and looked at him. She opened her lips to say something, thought better of it and hurried out.

Less than five minutes later she returned with one of the doctors. She was saying, "He did. I saw him with my own eyes," as she opened the door.

"Good morning, Lin," the doctor said. "The nurse tells me she saw you pull your legs up without touching them. Of course she's wrong."

Lin looked at his knees where they pushed the blankets up, a startled expression on his face. "So I did," he whispered in amazement. And he moved his legs again.

"That's impossible!" the doctor said sharply.

"So it is," Lin said, grinning. "I must have established a telepathic bridge across the severed nerves."

"That's impossible too," the doctor said, but his first surprise was wearing off. He came to the bed and pulled down the blankets, and stood there watching Lin move his legs. "Better take it easy until we check with fluoroscopy," he warned. "There's something mighty funny here. I examined the X-ray plates myself. The spinal break was un-

mistakable!"

Half an hour later Lin was relaxed on the table in the X-ray lab, while a full half dozen doctors studied him through the fluoroscope screen and all talked at once, with every once in a while one of them going to an illuminated plate and tracing what was quite obviously a wide gap in a spinal column.

"I think I could walk without any trouble if you'd let me get up," Lin remarked.

"Good heavens no!" one doctor gasped.

"I don't see why not," another said. "If we had nothing to go on but what we see now you'd agree nothing's wrong with him. Why not let him try?"

There were uneasy mutterings that gradually drifted into a majority opinion that he should try. The technician moved the fluoroscope screen out of the way.

Lin sat up, swiveled gently ninety degrees and lowered his legs over the edge of the table. Cautiously he eased his feet to the floor. Even more cautiously he let his weight gradually settle on them. While the doctors watched without seeming to breathe, he stood up and took a timid step, a more bold one, and then walked several steps and turned around, coming back to the table.

"Feels perfectly natural," he said. "I guess you'll have to admit you were wrong about that spinal cord break."

"But we weren't wrong!" It was the doctor who had had charge of Lin in the first place. "The X-rays prove it!"

"Are you sure they weren't mixed up with those of some other patient?" another doctor suggested.

"Find me another patient in this hospital who has a spinal break half an inch wide and I'll—I'll—"

"Eat him?" Lin suggested.

"Yes. I'll eat him. Gladly. There was definitely no error. A miracle is more possible than those X-ray plates getting mixed up."

"Does this fix me up then?" Lin asked. "Can I leave the hospital?"

Not for another two or three days under any circumstances," his doctor said. "Personally I think we should put you on display. Permanently. The first proven miracle in two thousand years. Or more! But we'd like you to remain long enough for us to make sure this isn't some freak happening that will undo itself. And also to give us time to get used to the fact that you can walk."

"Okay," Lin said. "I'd just as soon stay another couple of days anyway. Can I go back to my room and have another breakfast? I didn't get a chance to finish my first one."

AS soon as he was alone in his room he went to the window and peeked out. Below was the street, and to the left he could see the sidewalk that led to the main

entrance of the hospital.

Across the street were office buildings, and after a moment he found what he had half expected to find. Hugo Fairchild was standing on the sidewalk watching the entrance of the hospital.

"You should stay in bed."

Lin whirled at the sound of the voice, then relaxed with a relieved sigh. It was the doctor.

"Okay, doc," he growled. He went and sat on the edge of the bed.

A twisted smile curved the doctor's lips. "You know," he said, "you aren't the only miracle that happened in this hospital today."

Lin blinked. "Don't tell me Dorothy Lake, the girl in that other car, is the other one!"

"How did you know?" the doctor said. "Yes, it was she. Five fractured ribs and a broken right arm. And a severe laceration on the cheek. And not a sign of them now."

"Where is she?" Lin demanded. "I've got to see her."

"I wish I knew what was going on," the doctor said. He studied Lin silently. "I'll ask Miss Lake if she will see you."

Lin lay down and tried to relax while the doctor was gone, but his eyes didn't leave the door. It was over an hour before the nurse came in with a robe and the information that "Miss Lake wants to see you."

He followed her the full length of the hallway. She opened the door

for him. He went past her into the room, and saw the face he had seen through the windshield.

"I'll leave you alone for ten minutes," the nurse said.

"Hello," Dorothy Lake said nervously.

Lin saw that she was afraid. "Hello," he said. "You don't need to be afraid of me. I won't eat you. As a matter of fact, I'm awfully sorry I ran into you. If there's anything I can do . . . I'll pay the hospital bill of course . . ."

"I'm not afraid of you," she said. "It's the way I woke up this morning with nothing wrong with me. It scares me. I don't know what to make of it."

Lin started to say something and thought better of it.

"And there's something else," Dorothy went on. "It's the man that insisted on seeing me yesterday. He demanded that I give him a paper I was supposed to have. He wouldn't believe me when I told him I didn't know anything about it."

"Was his name Hugo Fairchild?" Lin asked.

"Yes!"

"I see it all now," Lin said grimly. "Your fate was written on that slip of paper too."

"My fate?" Dorothy said, bewildered.

"And he made us get well so we would have to leave the hospital," Lin went on. "When we leave he'll get us and take it away from me."

DOROTHY laughed nervously. "Don't leave it there. I think I'm really insane. The things that are happening can't happen. That's a good test of insanity isn't it?"

"Don't be silly," Lin said. "When a thing happens it *can* happen, no matter how impossible it may seem. Let me tell you what happened to cause all this."

"Please do," she said. "I'm sure it can't be any more impossible than my bones healing up and a bad cut on my cheek vanishing overnight without even leaving a scar."

"You think not?" Lin said grimly. "Then listen to this. You remember when we were about to hit? A fraction of a second before the crash? At that precise instant when you were staring at me reproachfully I suddenly found myself in—I don't know where it was, but I know it wasn't on this earth. I followed a path up to a high table-rock overlooking an immense valley, and there on that high perch was a statue."

"A statue?" Dorothy echoed.

"Don't interrupt," Lin said. "You can't possibly understand. I don't myself. So just listen to what happened and what I think it means. It was a moving statue. Like a robot, in a way. But it was more than that. I'm sure of that now. It was, in some way, a god. The god of Fate. It was typing on a typewriter of some sort that had an automatic feed to supply a new

sheet of paper every time the old one was yanked out. And beside the typewriter was a wastebasket sort of thing with a flame burning at the bottom. This statue would fill a sheet of paper with typing and then yank it out and drop it in the basket, and it would instantly burn. And I know now that the very process of burning that sheet of paper made reality out of whatever was written on it. And to cut a long story short, I yanked a sheet of paper out of the statue's fingers just as it was about to be dropped into the flame."

"But—" Dorothy said weakly.

"That piece of paper," Lin said firmly, "was our fate. Yours and mine. On it was written that we were to die in that accident. And until that paper is returned to that place and burned in the flame, *we cannot die!*"

She was looking at him queerly now.

"You think I'm crazy?" Lin said. "Hugo Fairchild came to get that paper didn't he? And I have it. Fairchild's waiting outside the hospital for me—or you—to come out with it, too. I saw him from my room."

"How . . ." Dorothy said weakly. "How did you get over into that—that other world?"

"I don't know," Lin said. "I just did, that's all."

"Then . . . then Hugo Fairchild is from this other world?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Lin said.

"But it's too late for it to do him any good now, isn't it?" she persisted. "The accident is over. We weren't killed."

Lin shook his head slowly. "It isn't too late, or he wouldn't want it. Don't you see? We, you and I, can't die until he gets it. That's why he wants it. Since it's written on it that we died in that crash, the moment it burns we'll be back where we were when I snatched that paper from the flames, and we'll die in that accident. Then all this, our being in the hospital and all, will never have happened!"

IT was the next day. Dorothy had come to Lin's room. She was peeking out the window at Fairchild down on the sidewalk.

"What will we do, Lin?" she asked, turning to him. "We can't hope to fight him. He must have supernatural powers, or he couldn't have caused us to recover so miraculously."

"I don't know," Lin said. "We'll have to sneak out the back way or something. We have to leave tomorrow, you know. Or—Look, he's after the paper and you don't have it. It's me he wants. I'll leave first, with that paper. Then you'll be free and can forget about it."

"I still can't believe it," Dorothy said. "If it weren't for the fact that my ribs were definitely broken, and I saw that nasty cut on my cheek . . ."

"You know there's no other ex-

planation," Lin said.

"But how could writing on a piece of paper *form* reality?" she objected. "It just can't!"

"But it does," Lin said. "What is reality? Scientists have been trying to find out since time began. There could be different kinds of reality. Ours could be subject to the minds of beings on another plane of it. This robot could sit there and write out things that happen, and make them happen here. It has to be that."

"I know," Dorothy said. "It has to be that, even if it doesn't seem possible."

She left the window and went to a chair and sat down.

"Lin," she said. "If he gets that paper we both die. I'm going with you. I couldn't stand going out alone and not knowing when he gets it."

"Nonsense," Lin said. "He won't get it. You can forget about it."

"What if he never gets it?" Dorothy asked.

"Then we'd live forever," Lin grinned. "Maybe that's why he has to get it back."

"Suppose," Dorothy said. "Suppose—don't think I'm silly, but suppose we destroyed it on this plane. Then it could never go into that flame."

"I don't know," Lin frowned. "Maybe any flame would make it happen. It would be an awful risk to take."

"We wouldn't have to burn it,"

she said. "We could tear it into little bits and let the wind carry them away, one at a time."

"I'll have the nurse get it," Lin said.

When the nurse brought it Dorothy examined it eagerly, trying to read what was typed on it. A light of excitement danced in her bright blue eyes. Finally she held it in a position to tear it.

"Shall I?" she said.

LIN nodded. She hesitated a moment, dramatically, then abruptly pulled her hands in a shearing movement that should have torn it easily.

It didn't.

"Here, let me do it," Lin said.

He took it and tried to tear it, without success. He grunted, and exerted every ounce of strength. It remained intact.

"That's funny," he said. "It tore easily when I grabbed it from Fate."

"Let's burn a little corner of it and see what happens," Dorothy suggested.

Lin went to the bedside stand and got his lighter. He held the flame to one corner of the sheet of paper. A minute went by, two minutes. The paper refused to burn or even char.

"Huh!" Lin said, snapping his lighter shut. "Well, it's a cinch that scissors will cut it. I'll ask the nurse to bring us a pair."

Ten minutes later he was trying to cut it, without success. It would bend between the blades of the scissors, or stop them from coming together at all. But it wouldn't cut.

"It's indestructible on this plane of existence," Dorothy said. "Now I believe you, Lin."

"I'm glad you do," Lin said dryly. "So now it's clear what I should do. My job is to hide this someplace where Hugo Fairchild can never find it. You can go your way and forget about it."

Dorothy shook her head. "No," she said. "I'm going with you. We'll face this together. I—I couldn't stand the suspense of wondering when Fairchild would catch up with you and get it."

"You'd get used to it," Lin said. "After all, everyone has to die sometime, and no one spends much time worrying about when it will come."

"But this isn't the same," Dorothy said stubbornly. "That man is after it, and when he gets it we'll die. I'm sticking with you—and that piece of paper."

Lin went to the window and peeked out. Fairchild was still in sight, watching the main entrance of the hospital.

"Okay," he said, turning back to Dorothy. "Go to your room and put on your street clothes. We're going to leave now. We'll sneak out the back way."

IN watched the door close, then went to work. Folding the piece of paper several times until it was a compact square, he taped it to his side under his left arm-pit where it couldn't be noticed.

He dressed swiftly, wrote a hurried note informing the hospital he wasn't sneaking out to avoid paying his bill. He left the note on the bed in plain sight and started toward the door. Just as he reached it he remembered Dorothy's hospital bill. He went back and added a P.S. for the hospital to put her on his bill.

Opening the door, he peeked out. A nurse was in the hall. He watched her until she went into a room, then slipped out and hurried toward the stairs.

He was grinning to himself. Dorothy wouldn't have had time yet to get dressed. And he had no intention of waiting for her. It would be too dangerous. She would find him gone. She would be unable to find him. And eventually she would take up her life where it had left off. In time she would forget him and think the whole thing a dream. That was the best way.

He passed people on the stairway without meeting anyone who would recognize him. In the basement the risk was greater. There were dozens of people. But no one stopped him as he hurried toward the exit. They considered him just a visitor, he reflected.

The critical moment was just ahead of him now. A hundred ques-

tions were tormenting him. How had Fairchild known which hospital he was in? How had Fairchild known it was he who had stolen that paper?

He shrugged the questions off. There was no way of knowing now. If Fairchild had powers that would enable him to discern that he was sneaking out the back way and be there waiting for him, he'd just have to make the best of it.

At the exit he paused and peeked out. There was a wide concrete driveway. An ambulance was parked there. No one was in sight.

He opened the door boldly and stepped out. He started along the driveway with an appearance of casual unconcern, as though he were a visitor taking a shortcut.

"Not so fast, Lin!"

He turned quickly. Dorothy was half running to catch up with him. He felt his pulse leap and somehow couldn't feel anger.

Dorothy smiled knowingly at him. "I figured you'd try to escape alone," she said. "So I hurried."

"Well, it was an idea," Lin said. "Come on. We've got to put distance between us and Fairchild before he discovers we're gone."

They reached the driveway exit. It was on a sidestreet from the main entrance. Fairchild wasn't in sight.

"Where'll we go?" Dorothy asked nervously.

"How about my apartment?" Lin said. "We can stay there months at a time without going outside."

HE gasped, then saw that he was laughing at her with his eyes. "I'll have you know . . ." she said angrily.

"Know what?" Lin prompted.

"Let's go *some* place," she said. "We can't just stand here."

"There's a taxi," Lin said, taking her hand and pulling her after him into the street. In the taxi he gave the driver directions. "First National Bank down on Center Street," he said. "Wait there. We're going to the airport from the bank." And to Dorothy in a lower voice, "We'll put some real distance between us and Fairchild. After that you can go your way and I'll go mine."

"If that's what you want," she said. She broke suddenly. "Oh, Lin. I don't know what I want. I don't want to leave you. I'm afraid. Or maybe I'm not. I don't know. It's all a rotten mess. Why couldn't we have met normally so that if—" She bit her lip and turned away.

The taxi hummed along for several blocks while they were silent. When Lin spoke his voice was low and serious. "Maybe I feel that way too," he said. "But—you know what's wrong with it? We're running away. It's like being an escaped criminal with a death sentence hanging over you."

"But it needn't be!" she said, laying her hand on his arm. "The police aren't after us or anything like that. We've given this Fairchild the slip now. All we have to

do is go away somewhere and he'll never find us."

"He'll be looking," Lin said, "and we'll wake up every morning with the knowledge that this may be the day he finds us." He turned and looked through the rear window of the taxi. "Actually I'm surprised we gave him the slip. I can't understand it."

"You feel that way?" Dorothy said with a shaky laugh. "I do too. He found us in the hospital. I keep thinking he just knows things. You know what I mean."

"He didn't know which one of us took that paper," Lin said. He frowned. "But he knew it was one of us. He must know what's on it. He has supernatural powers, too. Look how he fixed us up."

He looked through the back window again. When he straightened he fixed his eyes on Dorothy's face.

"Dorothy," he said, "maybe nothing can stop him from getting that paper back soon. It may be hours or days. But—would you marry me and make the most of it until . . .?"

She began twisting her fingers together nervously. "I—I don't know what to say," she hesitated. "It seems so wrong in a way. I don't mean wrong. Unfair. That's it. Unfair to—to both of us. Like we were doing this whether we love each other or not. It doesn't give whatever love we could have had a chance."

Lin stared at her a moment. "Then let's turn around and go back and give it to him," he said quietly.

"Let's—let's—" Suddenly she was in his arms, her face buried in his collar, her body trembling. She lifted her head until her cheek rested against his. Her voice was a whisper in his ear. "Let's—get married."

* * *

BOY, have you two got it?" Phil Arnoff said. "You get me on the phone and tell me to rush to town, and you can't wait five minutes. What's the matter? Afraid you'll fall out of love if you don't plunge?"

"We wouldn't have waited for you to get here," Lin said, "only we have to have a witness, they said when we got the license." He looked pleadingly at Dorothy. "Please, honey. Let's skip the church. You don't *have* to be married in one do you?"

"It's got to be a church," she said. "That's the one thing I've always been certain of."

"Why not?" Phil said. "There's a dozen churches that exist on weddings. Don't even have a congregation. Just weddings. One of 'em ought to have a vacant ten minutes today."

They found a phone booth and Lin began making calls. The third number was answered by a man with an Irish brogue who blessed them for their eagerness and agreed to perform the ceremony at once.

"Hah!" Lin said when he hung up.

"We'd have got along without you okay, Phil. Reverend O'Hara said he has a witness on hand all the time for couples like us."

"I'll trail along anyway," Phil grinned, "What *is* the rush though? How long have you two known each other?"

"We ran into each other a few days ago," Dorothy said, taking Lin's hand and leading him toward the sidewalk.

Phil followed them and noted silently the way they glanced anxiously about when they were out in the open, as though afraid of being seen by someone.

Lin flagged a cruising taxi again. The three of them piled into it and Lin gave the address of the church.

Phil broke the silence after a few blocks. "I'm being nosey, I know. But you two were obviously looking to see if you were being followed. Why don't you tell old uncle Phil about it? Huh?"

"About what?" Lin said, turning innocent eyes on him.

"Nothing," Phil said. "Only, sometimes three heads are better than one. If you two, or one of you, is in trouble, maybe I could be of help if I knew what to look out for."

"I doubt it," Lin grunted. "In fact, if we told you you wouldn't believe it, so skip it."

"So it is trouble," Phil murmured. "I thought so." He grunted. "Count me in on it. What is it. Bank robbery?"

"Worse than that," Dorothy said.

"But let's forget it. I want to relish every minute of my wedding."

"Just like a woman," Phil said, lifting his eyes upward. "My wedding, she says."

The taxi chose that moment to pull to the curb and stop. Outside was a small and picturesque church.

"Go on in and get things started," Phil said. "I'll pay the driver."

"Tell him to wait," Lin said. "This shouldn't take more than ten minutes." He took Dorothy by the hand and led her toward the entrance. Phil grinned at the taxi driver and shrugged.

"**A**S best man I get to kiss the bride first," Phil said fifteen minutes later.

Lin jumped, startled. "Huh uh!" he exclaimed. "I've never kissed her yet myself!" He put his arms around her and kissed her lingeringly.

She pulled away from his embrace finally, one hand trying to keep her hat on her head, murmuring, "It's about time!" But the bright lights in her eyes said that it was worth waiting for.

"Bless you, my children," the minister said, smiling.

"Oh yes, how much do I owe you?" Lin said. Realizing his mistake he hurriedly took out his bill-fold and handed the man a twenty dollar bill. He turned to Dorothy, not waiting for the thanks he expected.

Phil correctly interpreted the min-

ister's dismayed look and slipped him another ten. "He doesn't realize the overhead ate that up," he whispered. "He doesn't get married very often."

"Oh, I see," Reverend O'Hara whispered.

Phil hurried after Lin and Dorothy, catching up with them just outside the front entrance.

"Now," he said grimly as they got into the taxi again, "you want to be alone. My price for leaving you alone is for us to go somewhere first and have a drink or two—which you would anyway—and listen while you tell me what's behind all this rush." He looked sidelong at Dorothy and chuckled. "Surely it wasn't a race with the stork! Or is the hospital our next stop?"

"Of course not!" Dorothy said indignantly. "We just came from there this morning."

"Then this was . . . ?" Phil said, half seriously.

"Not what you think," Lin said. "There's the Shangri-La ahead. We can have a couple of drinks there and something to eat. And we'll tell you all about it, though you won't believe a word."

IT was almost two hours later. And four drinks later. "So you see why," Lin was saying while Phil stared at them with round eyes, "we don't know how long we have. Maybe—" He looked anxiously toward the gloom of the entrance

across the room. "He could walk in during the next minute. I can't see why he doesn't. I *know* he knows where we are. I feel it."

"And you have this paper taped to your side under your shirt?" Phil said. "Let me see it."

"No!" Dorothy said.

"I've known Phil most of my life," Lin said. "He's all right. Anyway, you know the thing's indestructible on this plane."

Dorothy hesitated, then reluctantly nodded her agreement. Lin yanked the folded paper from under his shirt.

Phil took it, unfolded it curiously, and frowned at the strange typewritten characters on it.

"You say it's indestructible?" he asked after a moment.

"We tried to tear it, to burn it, and to cut it with the scissors," Lin said. "All it does is bend."

Phil tried to tear it, cautiously at first, then exerting every ounce of strength in his fingers. He gave up and examined the paper with a new respect in his eyes. "I almost think I believe your tall tale," he said musingly.

He dipped a finger in his cocktail and rubbed it over the characters on the paper. Though they became wet they didn't blur or fade.

He took out his lighter and touched the corner of the paper to the flame. When it didn't char he touched it again and let the flame

play on one corner for a moment, then touched the corner with his fingers.

"Just warm," he grunted. He began folding the paper up the way it had been. "Of course there's one way I could help you," he said slowly. "You could let me keep this. I could hide it where even you wouldn't know how to find it. That way when this character catches up with you it's out of your hands."

"That's an idea," Lin said. "But we would know you had it. Maybe he could worm it out of us and then he'd be after you. And it wouldn't be your life that hung in the balance."

"True enough," Phil said. He cupped the folded paper in his hand, closing his fingers over it. "There's one or two points I'm not clear on, Lin. You say you grabbed it when it was still in Fate's fingers, and that's when that part tore off? You were able to tear it then. Why can't you now?"

"I don't know," Lin said. "Things are different over there, I guess. It burns over there, too, remember. In that flame."

"Yes, I know," Phil said. "I just—"

A terrified gasp from Dorothy interrupted what he had been about to say. Her eyes were wide and round, and fixed on the entrance across the room.

"Fairchild!" Lin gasped.

PHIL turned his head and glanced briefly at the man who stood there surveying the occupants of the room. He got swiftly to his feet just as Fairchild saw them and started toward them.

"Well, goodbye, kids," he said casually. But his broad wink warned them to let him escape with the paper that was still hidden in the palm of his hand.

"Give me back—" Lin blurted. But Phil was hurrying toward the entrance, passing Hugo Fairchild. Lin sighed in relief as Phil made it to the door and vanished.

"Well, well," Fairchild said. "I finally tracked you two down. So you're married now." He slid into the seat Phil had occupied.

"Yes, we're married," Lin said coldly. "And we want to be alone."

"I don't doubt that," Fairchild said. "I don't doubt it at all. I sympathize with you, but I have my job to do, you know."

"I'll bet you sympathize with us," Dorothy said worriedly.

"But I do, really," Fairchild said. "And to prove it I'm going to make you a nice offer. I don't have to, but I can, and I will. Give me the paper and I'll promise not to toss it into the Flame for a whole year. That will give you a year of happiness. It won't do any harm in the long run, because the instant that paper is consumed everything goes right back to the instant of the crash, and world events go on as they should have in the first place.

But I'll stick to my bargain. If you give me the paper without trouble."

"But we don't have it!" Dorothy blurted.

"You don't?" Fairchild exclaimed. His eyes widened in sudden comprehension. "That fellow . . ." He half rose and looked toward the exit. He glanced back at their faces and saw that he had guessed right. Waiting for no more he leaped across the room, bumping into a waiter and causing him to spill a tray of drinks. Then he was out the door before anyone could stop him.

"I hope Phil had sense enough to get far away, and quick," Lin groaned. "Come on, Dorothy, let's see." He dropped enough money on the table to take care of the check and, taking her arm, hurried after Fairchild.

Twenty feet away a crowd had gathered about a central point. They ran to the crowd and pushed their way toward its center. Dorothy gasped and Lin tensed at what they saw.

Phil was getting slowly to his feet, nursing a large bruise under one eye with gentle fingers.

"The other guy just vanished!" someone said unbelieving. "I saw him! He just vanished in thin air where he was standing!"

"Did he get it?" Lin said, helping Phil to his feet.

Phil nodded, then muttered, "Let's get away from here. I think I need another drink."

Lin's legs were suddenly watery. Dorothy's lip was trembling.

"A drink," Lin said dully, then, determinedly, "Yes, a drink." He took Dorothy's arm in his fingers. "Come on, honey. Maybe we'll have time."

"A drink?" Dorothy said shrilly. "We're going to be dead in another minute and all you want is time enough to have a drink?"

"That isn't it at all," Lin said. "Let's get off the street."

HE guided her firmly through the crowd, Phil following in their wake. They went back into the Shangri-La once more and back to their table where their unfinished drinks still rested.

"I'm sorry you took what I said the wrong way," Lin said. "Believe me—"

"It's all right, darling," Dorothy said. "I know you didn't mean it that way. It's just that, well, we haven't had a chance together . . ." Her lips started to tremble again, then she was smiling bravely.

"That's the girl," Phil said.

"You should talk," Lin growled. "You aren't going to die."

"Let's drink to that, or something," Phil said. "I need one, and I'm sure you both do too."

They drank solemnly. Lin and Dorothy were looking into each other's eyes as they drank.

"I wish—" Lin choked.

"I know," Dorothy said. She leaned across the table and Lin

kissed her.

"Cigarette?" Phil asked, holding out his pack. They each took one and he lit them with his lighter.

"Three on a match," Dorothy said nervously. "I guess it's all right this time though. The conclusion is foregone."

"Wonder how long it will take," Lin said, sucking in the smoke hungrily.

"That's another thing," Phil said. "That other time you took that long walk and got the paper and walked back to where you started from, and it all happened in less than an instant."

"That's right," Lin said. "He should be . . ."

"As a matter of fact," Phil said, "I think he should. So it worked after all. I'd really hoped it would. Or maybe . . . but I think it worked."

"What worked?" Lin and Dorothy demanded together.

"He must have tossed that paper into the flame by now, unless he read what was on it," Phil said. He spread his hands apologetically. "You see I knew this couldn't go on forever. The only way to fight the supernatural is to outsmart it, I figured. So I wrote on it. Simple as that. I bore down good too so that if the ink came off, the writing would still be creased in good. On the theory that *whatever* was on that paper would come true when it got burned."

"What did you write?" Again

Lin and Dorothy spoke in unison.

"I didn't have time for anything involved," Phil apologized. "I rather expected him to be after me before I could go far."

"What did you write?"

"Just one word," Phil said, "*Cancelled.*"

"Cancelled?" Lin and Dorothy echoed dumbly, then, comprehendingly, "Cancelled!"

"Sure," Phil said. "That way when it was burned it wouldn't do anything. They'll have to start over on you."

They stared at him wordlessly.

"It must have been burned by now," he added weakly. "So my scheme worked."

They turned their heads and looked into each other's eyes. Two ghostly windshields obscured their vision. The tables and people about them faded, to be replaced by ghostly pines, a more solid concrete highway.

They stared into each other's eyes, knowing all that had been, feeling it slip away.

But abruptly it vanished and they were looking at each other across

the table while a waiter asked them if they wanted another drink. For a long second their minds hovered in that other stream of time before the realization came that it was over and they were safe.

"Another?" Lin said. "Yes. Sure. You want one, Dorothy?"

She nodded and watched the waiter's back as he hurried away.

"You two look as if you'd seen a ghost," Phil said. "I would almost swear that paper reached the flame a second ago."

Dorothy turned to him. "It did," she said. "And I don't know whether to be happy about it or—never forgive you."

"Why?" Phil asked.

She looked at Lin, her eyes soft and luminous. Her hand reached out and nestled in his.

"Well," she said, "it seems to me the least you could have done while you had the opportunity was write on it for us to live forever!"

She laughed nervously.

Lin flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette and grinned at her. "That would have been tempting Fate!" he said . . .

NEXT ISSUE — THE NOVEL YOU'VE WAITED FOR! NO TIME FOR TOFFEE!

By CHARLES F. MYERS

Here it is, a brilliant new novel from the pen of the greatest fantasy writer since Thorne Smith! If you've followed the hilarious adventures of Toffee, the delectable, saucy dream-girl materialized from Marc Pillsworth's mind, you know you're in for a great treat. If this is your first TOFFEE story, you're in for a new thrill in science-fantasy. No announcement can do a TOFFEE novel justice—you have to read it yourself! Reserve your copy of the great July issue at your newsdealer now. ON SALE FIRST WEEK IN MAY!



Conducted by **Mari Wolf**

CONVENTION time is coming around again. The Chicago Tenth World Science Fiction Convention. Quite a milestone. It's been years since Chicago last held a world convention—the first one.

There have been a lot of changes in the science fiction field since that first get-together in 1940. Fantasy readers are no longer a relatively small group, with most of the population saying vaguely, "You read science fiction? What's that? Green men from Mars, or something . . ."

Now you can't escape it. It's on the radio. It's in the Sunday supplements. Hollywood has picked it up, and on television the space opera ranks right along with the horse variety. It's even hit the fashion market, with quite a few children putting aside their cowboy clothes and talking their parents into buying them spacesuits.

Some of the juvenile stf programs are a little hard to swallow, especially from the vantage point of years and years of having read science fiction. But they take me back a

ways. Back to a time when, so far as I know, I'd never read a science fiction book or magazine and my only knowledge of the field came from Jules Verne and the funny papers.

We had a sort of gang. Half a dozen of us, aged eight to eleven, who played wild and woolly adventure games down in the canyon below my house. I was the one who twisted our more or less conventional Indians game into science fiction . . . We were on Venus, and horrible, sticky plants were stalking us across the swamps, and we crawled away from them through patches of very real poison oak. There were all sorts of villains, of course, trying to get the magic Turquoise away from us, so they could travel back in time and take the gold away from the ancient Incas. (This was our version of the time-paradox, because maybe the reason no one has ever found the Inca gold is that it's going to be stolen in the future.)

Our plots were all lurid. We made them up as we went along. They

were like the old movie serials, with the heroine in some desperate predicament at the end of each reel. Every day at least one of us was paralyzed by a ray gun, thrown into a pit full of six-headed snakes, tied to a carnivorous tree trunk as a human sacrifice, or merely blown up.

Some of the younger members of the group weren't so subtle. They'd break up the most suspense-filled sequences by rushing down the hill waving clubs and yelling, "The Indians are attacking!" We never got rid of those Indians. Even on Venus they attacked us . . .

I USED to plot these stories, more or less. The others would fight for the leading roles and be hero and heroine, arch villain and cannibal Venusian dupe. That suited me fine. I'd take all the minor parts, eight or ten of them at once, and from sheer force of numbers make the story go any way I wanted it to. It would be nice if I could say that I put in great humanitarian concepts, or pleas toward peace and good will between planets. But I didn't. I thought up more ways of killing each other off than anyone else.

So now, when I hear members of "the older generation" get very upset because their children are reading blood-thirsty comic books that will turn them into monsters, I can't help but smile. We did more than read them. And so far none of us has so much as robbed a bank, much less tried out our novel methods of murder. In fact, we're all very peace loving—now.

Perhaps that's why I firmly believe that children are naturally adventurous, and that they should be allowed to work the enthusiasm out of their systems and outgrow it. Let their imaginations run riot. After

a while they'll become tired of bloodshed and turn of their own accord to more constructive things. They'll get interested in the science behind their ray-guns and spaceships and anti-gravity belts. They'll get interested in the types of civilizations that their alien brain-children live in. They'll get interested in all sorts of fields, from psychology to physics to literature, that might have bored them forever if they'd been made to put aside their ray-guns and settle down to study "something worth while."

I'm all for science fiction for children, especially if they really play at it as well as read it and watch it on television. I remember how much fun we always had. Sometimes I even wish that I could feel that way again, that I could walk through the canyon and really see the cannibal creepers of the Venusian swamps, that I could look across at some woman hanging out her wash and see instead the villain signalling his men as the trap closes in behind us . . . Now it's imagination, purely make-believe. Once there were times when, for a short while between school and dinner, it was real.

* * *

ARE you going to the Chicago convention this summer? It promises to be the biggest and best yet, and it's really well organized. There will be something for every fan, no matter what his special interests. And it's centrally located, too, for everyone except us out here on the West Coast. But if we can possibly help it we're not going to let a mere couple of thousand miles stand in our way.

That brings up a matter I'd like to clear up right away—the misconceptions some people have about sci-

ence fiction conventions. They seem to think you can't have fun at one unless you've got a lot of money to spend. They think that a few big collectors buy everything at the auctions, and that there isn't much use bidding if you're just an average fan with a yen for an original or two. They think that there's an inside and an outside, and if you're not one of the insiders you're left out altogether, looking in with your nose pressed up against the glass.

I don't know where that idea got started. Certainly anyone who's ever been to a convention can debunk it. It's just about as far from the true state of affairs as possible. Conventions are run by fans, people who like science fiction. They're run for fans, for everyone who likes fantasy, whether he's an active fan with his own fanzine or a new reader who has just discovered what it's like.

I've been to only one convention. In Portland, in '50. I wasn't any "insider". I was just a fan, not even a very active one, though I did go up to Portland with two of the most active of all, Rick Sneary and Stan Woolston. And I had a wonderful time, as much fun as I've ever had in my life.

Just about any fan who has ever gone conventioneering will tell you the same thing.

Sure, it does cost money to attend a convention, especially if it's held a long way from where you live. But if it cost as much as some readers seem to think, very few fans would ever go to one. Fans in general aren't wealthy. Lots of them save up all year in order to go to convention and then find at the very last minute that they can't make it. They can't get off work then, or something else comes up. So they start in waiting for the next year ...

Most of the people at a convention come from within a radius of a few hundred miles. That's the reason that the get-togethers are held in different parts of the country each year—so that as many fans as possible will be able to attend, if not this year then next year or the year after. In 1949 it was Cincinnati; in 1950, Portland; in 1951, New Orleans. In 1952 it will be in Chicago again.

FANS travel to conventions in all sorts of ways. Some take the bus or train. Lots of times a group of them will get together and drive, sharing expenses for the trip, and maybe picking up as many other fans enroute as can be crowded into the car. This is about the most economical way of traveling, besides being a lot of fun. Some fans hitch-hike. But they all get there.

At the Portland Convention there was one young fan of about twelve. He'd come up from California on a bus. He was going back that way too, unless he could hitch a ride from someone passing near his home town. He was as self-reliant as could be. And he never stopped grinning.

But room and board are expensive, you say? Not necessarily. A couple of fans sharing a room in a hotel and eating in the neighborhood cafes can get along very nicely on a limited budget. It isn't as if all the fun went on at some fifty dollar a plate banquet, as in some non stf conventions. Most of the fun comes from meeting people you know about and are interested in —both pro and fan. Maybe going out for a cup of coffee with an assorted group like your favorite pro writer, the fan editor who printed your first article, and some girl fan you've been corresponding with for

months but have never met before... Yes, you can find everything at a convention, romance included. But that's another story.

There isn't very much formality. You get to the convention. You pay your dollar's membership in the Committee, if you haven't sent it in already. You're given a membership card, if you don't already have one, and usually a badge to wear, telling who you are. Then you start mingling.

You'll have a program, telling what goes on when. There are lots of meetings, forums, speeches, meet-the-pros, and just plain get-togethers. It's up to you to decide which ones you want to attend. If you're interested in the technical side of putting out a fanzine, you might join a group discussing the photo-offset method as compared to the mimeograph. Or you might be interested in learning how to build a rocket ship intelligently (in print, that is). Or how to write technical articles. Or what sort of artwork different magazines prefer.

Some parts of the program you won't want to miss. You'll want to see and hear from the guest of honor and all the other pro editors and writers and artists whose work you've been enjoying ever since you became interested in science fiction. You'll want to hear them talk about their work, and get a glimpse of the behind the scenes activity that goes into every issue. You'll want to be at the auction, of course, even if you're not a collector.

That's another thing. Sure, there are always people there ready to outbid anyone in order to get their favorite original cover or inside illustration, but there are lots of originals, too. After the auction ended in Portland, the happiest people were

not those big collectors. The biggest grins were on the faces of the young fans who'd just bought their first illustration, after weeks and maybe months of looking forward to it. Most of those illustrations aren't in somebody's complete collection now. They're hanging in bedrooms and dens and clubrooms. And they're really appreciated.

There are lots of other things going on at a convention. More than any one person can possibly get around to attending. But when it's all over and you're heading homeward, it isn't the big meeting that you'll remember best, nor the speeches, nor the auction, nor any of the formal program. These are all important, and you'll never forget them. But it's the little things you'll really look back on. The get-togethers late at night with newfound friends from all over the country, the goodnatured arguments, the realization that your favorite writer is a human being, and not someone chained to a typewriter in some editor's cellar.

Or maybe, like me, you'll look back on the long walks at dawn through a strange city, with people who a short while ago were strangers, but who now are friends.

That's what conventions are really like.

* * *

Now for the fanzines. There are quite a few of them in the Box this time, too. Probably there's at least one you'd really like. So here they are . . .

* * *

COSMAG SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST: 25c; bimonthly; Ian Macauley, 57 East Park Lane, Atlanta, Georgia. The two Atlanta fanzines, Cosmag and Science Fiction Digest, have combined into one. But they haven't merged. In the copy I have,

the first sixteen pages make up Ian Macauley's *Cosmag*; next comes a complete section of Henry Purwell's *Digest*. Next issue the order will be reversed. You can get your copy from either source—that's *Cosmag*'s address listed above.

The new format is very attractive. All photo offset, very readable and with lots of illustrations. Jerry Burge proves himself a good cover artist. In the *Cosmag* half, J. T. Oliver has a gripping short, "Seven to Eleven," and the *Digest* reprints Hannes Bok's gentle complaint, "Why Artists Go But Grey."

These fanzines make a really good twosome.

* * *

PEON: 15c or 9/\$1.00; bimonthly; Charles Lee Riddle, PN1, USN, Fleet All Weather Training Unit, Pacific, c/o Fleet Post Office, San Francisco, Calif. I don't know how Charles Riddle and assistant editor Gene Hunter manage to find time to turn out such a fine fanzine as *Peon* and still do their bit for the Navy. But manage it they certainly do.

There are all kinds of fanzines, many of them dealing in specialized fields—poetry, fiction, swap news, technology. *Peon*'s appeal is general. It's a fanzine I'd hand to someone who asked me pointblank, "You talk enough about fanzines, but what are they, anyway? And why do you like them?"

The answers are easy. Take this issue of *Peon* I have here. In it there's a well-written short by Alice Bullock, "Harbringers." Art Rapp's book reviews are a lot more informative than most you read in the pro magazines. My favorite item, though, is a reprint under the heading "Fanzine Classics." It's Anthony Boucher's "So You Want To Be An Editor." It's a really well-balanced issue.

So why don't you send for a copy?

* * *

SOL: 10c; published irregularly; David Ish, 914 Hammond Road, Ridgewood, New Jersey. Here's another brand-new fanzine—New Jersey's first, according to its editor.

David Ish can, and does, tell you what it's like to bring a new zine into the world. It's work! He gives some advice to fans, "... Don't publish a fanzine if you haven't already been caught by the disease—you just can't stop! Cutting stencils into the wee hours of the morning, the wasted reams of paper on foolish experiments . . . And if you get the stupid idea you're going to make money—just ignore it."

But isn't it fun?

Like almost every new fanzine, Sol has its rough edges, particularly in the stencil cutting department. It's a bit fuzzy to read. But it starts off with a balance of stories and articles that speak well for its future.

And Rog Phillips tells, "How My Writing Career Started." Hah!

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c, 12/\$1.00; twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing 54, N. Y.

Here's another fanzine I'd pick to show someone who wants to know what fan publishing is all about. I'd show it as a top example of a specialized field in fandom—news-gathering. *Fantasy-Times* is literally the newspaper of science fiction. It covers everything in the field that's of interest to fans, and it keeps its readers up to date on science fiction trends and personalities, as well as on new magazines, books, movies, and radio shows.

Do you want to know what's going on in the stf world? Finding out is easy. Just read *Fantasy-Times*.

* * *

QUANDRY: 10c; monthly; Lee Hoffman, 101 Wagner St., Savannah, Georgia. Have you noticed how many top fanzines have been coming out of the South lately? Of them all, I like Quandry about the best. In just a little over a year it's reached the stage where it's being held up as an example with young fans putting out a zine that they hope "will someday be like Quandry."

It's a mark to shoot at.

Quandry's top issue, though, is still Anniversary Issue No. 13, the extra special 25c copy with 99 pages of fiction and articles, including items by Bob Tucker, David English, Stephen Craig and a host of others.

What're you going to have for your second anniversary, Lee?

* * *

OPERATION FANTAST HANDBOOK: quarterly; 4 issues for 75c; American representative, Phil Rasch, 715 W. 112th. St., Los Angeles 44, Calif. The price of single copies of this British fanzine doesn't seem to be given—only the yearly subscription rate. But you really get a lot for your seventy-five cents.

Fantast is really international in scope. It keeps up with activities of fans in America, Canada and Australia, as well as those in Great Britain.

In addition to the fanzine itself, Operation Fantast has many types of services available for its subscribers. Want to trade American magazines for British books? Fantast's Trading Bureau will handle it for you. Want to get in touch with other fans having your special interests? Fantast's Contact Bureau will give you names and addresses from all over the world.

And for British fans there's a special service available only in Europe—the library, which circulates all the latest science fiction books on a

lending basis and for a very small fee.

If you're at all interested in seeing how fandom operates abroad, get in touch with Phil Rasch and take a look at Fantast for yourself.

* * *

NEWSSCOPE: 5c, 12/50c; monthly; Lawrence Ray Campbell, 43 Tremont St., Malden 48, Mass. Newsscope's slogan is "A complete coverage of all the news," and it lives up to it very well indeed. It covers the field thoroughly, giving information on science fiction films, books, and magazine stories. Also, it carries more news about fandom and fanzines than do most of the other newsheets.

Do you wonder what's been going on in the science fiction world recently? Send for Newsscope. Only costs a nickel . . .

* * *

UTOPIAN: 25c; R. J. Banks Jr., 111 So. 15th St., Corsicana, Texas. Utopian gives you a lot for your quarter—sixty mimeographed pages of fiction, articles, poetry, and letters from the readers.

Leif Ayen's column, "The Vulture's Nest," is exceptionally good reading. In the issue I have here he writes on "Racial Types in Fantasy," and takes a good long look at the themes of racial tolerance and discrimination in science fiction. (Racial in this sense often referring to alien.)

There are also good stories as usual, by Leif Ayen, Tom Covington, and Neil Wood.

* * *

STF TRADER: 10c, 4/25c; monthly; Jack Irwin, Box 3, Tyro, Kansas. This fanzine is, as its name implies, put out for collectors of science fiction and fantasy material. It's made up of ads listing what different fans want to sell, swap, or acquire.

There are always lots of hard-to-

get back issues listed, as well as good book buys. So if you're interested in collecting, or if you'd just like to do some swapping, here's a good place to begin.

* * *

FAN-VET: James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing 54, New York. The Fantasy Veterans Association, made up of both veteran and present members of the U. S. Armed Forces, puts out this one sheet newszine. It's devoted to the interests of the fantasy fan in the services, and one of its principal activities is supplying overseas fans with stf magazines and fanzines.

If you're in the service yourself, or if you know any servicemen fans who might be interested in the Association. Fan-Vet would be glad to hear from you.

* * *

IMAGINATIVE COLLECTOR combined with DAWN; 15c; bimonthly; Kussel K. Watkins, 203 Wampum Ave., Louisville 9, Kentucky. In the issue I have here Coswal goes back to the days of the dime novels and comes up with—science fiction. The Frank Reade Library, by "Noname," which flourished in the 1890's. I didn't know that in those days you could get, for only a nickel, stories about the great inventor Reade and his steam man (robot). Interesting.

Not much about collecting, but there'll be more in future issues, Watkins says.

* * *

FANTASY ADVERTISER: 20c; bimonthly; published at 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, Calif. Fantasy Advertiser calls itself a bimonthly science fiction review, and this is exactly what it is, combined with an excellent advertising medium.

The Advertiser is beautifully packaged, definitely on the professional side. And of course, it's supported

by the ads it carries. Rare books for sale or wanted. New books. Magazine back issues. You'll find them all here.

* * *

STEF HEADLINEWS: 20 issues 50c, 4 free on request; fortnightly; Walter A. Coslet, Box 6, Helena, Montana. This is the newszine that comes written on the back of a postcard—capsule coverage of the science fiction world. The news accent varies from card to card. Sometimes it's all about fan doings, other times about changes in the professional field, or news about movie and TV shows. But there's always a lot of information crammed onto the card.

* * *

GEM TONES: G. M. Carr, 3200 Harvard Ave., N., Seattle 2, Wash. I don't suppose I ought to be re-viewing this, as it's not for sale. But darn it, I always get so much pleasure out of reading it that I just have to mention it.

Each issue of Gem Tones is named for some particular jewel. The issue I have here is the Chrysoberyl edition, one of the best yet. I wish everyone could read "Grandmother's Tales."

If you put out a fanzine yourself you can swap a copy for Gem Tones. If you don't, maybe you could wheedle one out of G. M. Carr. With all its incisive humor it's certainly worth a wheedle or two.

* * *

Well, here I am at the bottom of the BOX again. Remember, if you have a fanzine you'd like reviewed here, send it to me at P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Ill. And if you're planning any big fan activities in your part of the country, write in and let everyone know about them!

—Mari Wolf

Letters

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from the

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Readers

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DEFINITION OF A FAN . . . ?

Dear Mr. Hamling:

What is your definition of a fan? To me it has always been "an instrument for manufacturing cooling breezes in warm weather," but some of the letters in your readers' column would have me change that definition to "a person producing large quantities of hot air supposedly pertaining to science fiction, but may cover art, mathematics, arguments about dianetics or literary criticisms."

Why is it that every person who pays his 35c to enjoy your wonderful magazine thinks he is entitled to razz the dickens out of your illustrators or authors? Most of us who read science fiction (what does the "t" stand for in "stf" meaning "science fiction"?) are not recognized literary critics. If we were, we would stick to Keats, Shakespeare and Ogden Nash, leaving science fiction to those who like it. A glance over my unwieldy sentence structure will tell you that I am not qualified to criticize other than to state my preference for more stories like "Yachting Party" that leave you with a little something to chew over

mentally.

I wonder if you could spare the time to glance over the Reader section in the January issue, comparing letters from American readers with those from people in other countries, my own native Canada among them. Notice the amount (and quality) of the criticism in the American letters and the lack of criticism in the others. We, speaking for those of us outside the U.S., seem to be satisfied to state our preference and let it go at that. I hope the large ratio of favorable comments to unfavorable ones is not due to editor selection, because the rest of the magazine is so downright enjoyable that I would hate to think every time I turned to laugh over some crank's remarks such as "Tripe" in the January issue by Mr. Sorenson, that you had purposely given it that balance.

There! I've done it! I said your magazine was enjoyable! And it wasn't just to get my letter printed, either. I honestly do enjoy Madge!

I would like to see a little more participation in this column by the Canadian fans like myself who belong to no special fan club (is there

one in or near North Bay?) but who enjoy reading science fiction for what they get out of it and not just for criticizing.

I guess that covers what I have to say for now. So, until next issue, keep up the good work!

Alan Fogal
810 Algonquin Ave.
North Bay, Ont.,
Canada

Science fiction fans are unique in the literary field, Alan. For a true science fiction enthusiast takes his "hobby" seriously. He gets in there and applauds for what he thinks is good—and he hollers loudly against what he thinks is bad. (Very often he finds himself at odds with other fans—which only proves the old adage: "What's one man's meat is another's poison.")

Fans, by and large, are sincere and honest in their critiques. Their one aim (it should be if it isn't!) is to raise science fiction to even higher levels of popularity and acclaim. For this reason they take active roles in the pro mags such as *Madge*, and form clubs, fan magazines, and hold yearly conventions.

In our book the true fan is a person who refuses to put the "im" in front of "possible". That's the spirit of science fiction—and we're for it a thousand per cent . . . wth

THE "T" IN STF!

Dear Ed:

As in the case of many readers, this is my first letter to any magazine. I became a rabid fan when I first read "The Legion of Space" by Jack Williamson. So far no story has ever equalled it.

I then started to read "Galaxy" but got tired of its stuffy attitude and hard to understand stories. I then tried *IMAGINATION* — and

here I am!

The lead stories in *Madge* are tops, and the other yarns are also good. The January issue is even better than the November issue.

Don't have serials; and by the way, I have heard of s-f (science fiction), but I can't figure out what stf stands for. I would appreciate it if you would explain stf.—And keep up the fine job with *Madge*.

Robert Mischler
311 Dale Drive
Silver Springs, Md.

Stf stands for "Scientific fiction". This coined word stems from the days of Hugo Gernsback, founder of *AMAZING STORIES* back in 1926; it has since been replaced by "science fiction" and the two abbreviations, s-f and stf. We prefer the latter abbreviation although its parent word is seldom used these days . . . wth

HEY, SORENSEN!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I have just put down the January issue of *Madge* and I had to tell you how good it was. However, I do not agree with your editorial statement that it was the best issue yet. I think the November issue was!

The cover for January was excellent. I hope it isn't the last one Terry does! The interiors were good too.

That cartoon was really clever! (Page five.) Who thought it up?

The stories were good, and I only found two that didn't quite suit me; *THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY*—it sure was. It was too short to be good—if Jake had made it longer, but . . . And *LETTER TO THE EDITOR* failed to interest me. I have been reading stf for 1 year and that is the sorriest story I've read yet.

Why doesn't someone start a stf book of the month club?

Now we come to the Reader's Section where friends meet and become enemies! I have a few choice things to say to that irate citizen, Sorenson. I have read letters that made me angry, but never one so stupid. I quote: "At a cost of 10 cents more than the usual run of stf & fantasy pulps . . ." unquote. Madge is not the "usual" pulp magazine—it is SENSATIONAL! As to pulp—Madge is printed on smooth paper! I quote again: "TRIPE!" unquote. Tripe, my dear Sorenson, is the outside of the belly of a cow, bull or pig, and is edible. Madge, though good enough to eat—is not edible! And furthermore, if you are too tight to buy Madge the way it is—get a subscription—your issues will only cost 25c that way!

Ron Thompson

730 S. 9th Court

Birmingham 5, Ala.

We're glad you liked Bill Terry's cover so well, Ron. And here's some good news—Terry has just finished a terrific new painting! You'll be seeing it on an early issue—and believe us, it will bowl you over—it's that good wlh

COMPLIMENT—IN REVERSE!

Dear Ed:

I got the January Madge today. Pretty good. Here's my analysis:

Cover: Good, but not up to your standard. If Terry can't do better than this keep him on inside illos.

Neville's biog: It's amazing (no pun intended) how many words can be used to say nothing.

Editorial: Somebody said that wlh wrote the simplest editorials of any editor. Now I believe him. I no like.

Illo for SPECIAL DELIVERY: I no like too much.

Illo for MOST HORRIBLE STORY: Pretty good.

Illo for WOO-WOO: McCauley's back! Good, good!

Illo for YACHTING PARTY: Another good Terry. What is this mag coming to!

Illo for LETTER TO EDITOR: Very, very good! I like Herb Ruud, let's have more by him!

Illo for RETURN ENGAGEMENT: Terry's usual stuff—pretty good.

Illo for RUN, LITTLE MONSTER!: Pretty good too.

The stories: SPECIAL DELIVERY: 28,000 words is a novel? Haven't read it yet . . .

MOST HORRIBLE STORY: Very good, but I don't think it will be anthologized.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: Very good. I didn't know Matheson could write comedy too.

RUN, LITTLE MONSTER!: 8,500 words is a novelette? Haven't read it yet.

FANDORA'S BOX: Very good, as usual.

Letters: Good, but too long. I usually like long letters columns, but not your type.

As to Sorenson, he probably did not like the September issue because it was too pulpy and had too much space opera.

Terry Carr

134 Cambridge St.

San Francisco 12, Cal.

Thanks a lot for the compliment about writing the simplest editorials of any editor. We pride ourselves in being natural; we're not trying to impress anybody with hot air editorials or distorting facts about being the top magazine. We go on the assumption that our readers don't want to be fooled—can't be, for that shows up in the profit and loss statement. We write our edi-

torial with the idea that the reader wants to know what's going on in the office as we go to press—how we feel about the issue, stf films, stf in general, and, in fact, anything that comes into our simple little minds at the moment. Over here at Madge we're not very complicated people; we don't have psychological problems: we don't foster hair-brained theories and palm them off as fact. We're just normal, happily married people with an equally happy family and a big love for science fiction. Perhaps that simple life we lead is reflected in our mode of editing. We hope so. It's the only healthy — and profitable trait we know—or care to know!

Is the 28,000 worder a novel? Well, we know it's not a short story! Besides, what difference does it make—the story was a humdinger! We give the word count to give our readers some idea of how long it may take to read the yarn. Just another example of our simple (most readers call it effective!) editing . . . wh

MOVING RIGHT ALONG!

Dear Bill Hamling:

I think the January issue (as you said in your editorial) is the best yet. As you know, the lead novel can make or break an issue, and Neville's SPECIAL DELIVERY was the kind that "makes" them! It is the best novel you have published so far — even better than Bloch's HELL'S ANGEL. Neville is one of the few stf writers who is a Writer first and a science-fictionist second. Let's have more stories by him.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR was fine. Neat idea, well written, and nicely developed. Matheson is another of my favorites among the new writers.

Next best story was THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY, by John W. Jakes. This was well written and the punch came as a complete surprise. Nice off-trail idea too.

The only story I didn't care for was RUN, LITTLE MONSTER! But I'm sure that it is simply a matter of taste. Some people will think it is the best story in the issue!

The cover was very nice. I did not think Terry could do it. His interiors are okay, but not exceptional. How about giving him another cover?

In the reader section I'm glad you answer the letters. I agree with you 100% about reprints. I don't buy reprint magazines, except Boucher's, and I don't think he uses them to save money.

Went down and saw THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL recently. It is the best stf movie I have ever seen. It had people in it. I really enjoyed it, and it had a good run at the Georgia, our finest theater.

Well, you're moving right along, Bill Hamling. Keep it up!

J. T. Oliver
315-27th St.
Columbus, Ga.

Speaking of enjoyment, our readers enjoyed your story, THE KILLER, last issue. How about doing another as good for a future issue! As to THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL, yep, we thought it was terrific too wh

NOT ONE BETTER!

Dear Ed:

I've been reading stf for a few months now, and this is my first letter to any magazine.

After sampling most stf magazines on the market—and there are a whale of a lot of them—I couldn'

find one better than Madge!

For example, look at the January issue. I can do nothing but echo your sentiments expressed in the Editorial . . . "this is the finest issue of Madge you've had yet."

Re serials, no, NO—a thousand times no! Just as you are on the edge of your chair waiting to read what happens next—up comes "continued next issue."

Enclosed is three bucks for a subscription to Madge—a real bargain for more than two years of reading pleasure!

Oh yes, the cover—here I go again, terrific!

And good luck to you and your TERRIFIC magazine!

Joe Coltrane
744 N.W. 4th St.
Miami 36, Fla.

P.S. How do I get back issues of Madge—I missed a few along the line.

Welcome into the fold, Joe. Back issues? They're available as part of your subscription, or, for those who don't subscribe, at 35c each . . . wh

COVER DESIGN OK!

Dear Bill:

A few issues ago I protested against the change in cover policy because I felt the new design lacked the artistic quality of the old design. I still haven't changed my mind but I will say this: The last few months have produced a considerable improvement over the pioneer June issue. The widening of the white band has produced a more eye-pleasing arrangement.

In the January letter section I don't agree with Judy Sanow about Dwight Swain's talents, but I do think she has a point about his use of italics. I'd suggest he cut down on his use of them.

John Jakes' THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY led the January issue, closely followed by Neville's SPECIAL DELIVERY and Matheson's LETTER TO THE EDITOR. Springer's ALIAS A WOO-WOO was also good.

James Lynch
2630 Penn Ave., N.,
Minneapolis, Minn.

We're glad you finally decided the new cover format was ok, Jimmy. The rest of the readers think it is—and we do too! wh

SUH, THIS MEANS WAR!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Well cut off my legs and call me shorty! I see those durn Yankees are raising a ruckus again. Imagine those aliens from some state other than Texas saying that such and such a novel resembled a western. Evidently they've never been to the real West — TEXAS! The novel I'm yodeling about is "Cry Chaos!" and the Yankees I've picked at random from the letter section in the January issue. (Anybody living north of Oklahoma is nothing but a blamed Yankee!)

Let them rave! But I'll say one thing. When the day comes that the rocket ship does become a reality it will surely be easier to change from a western cowboy to a star boy riding rockets than to change from a Yankee desk boy!

And someone wrote and slurred the conventions and got an original for it! What gives? Have I got a chance, too?

Up to date I've every issue of IMAGINATION with a sub to insure my receiving future issues. I must say that the January issue was the best one to reach my mail box yet. THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY by John Jakes is already in the anthol-

ogy of my favorite stories.

Claude Ray Hall
Box 611

Winters, Texas
Whoa, there, podnuh, let's not get into a lather 'bout us Yankees! We are all ridin' the star trails together! . . . As to this here original illo ruckus, we think we can solve the situation with a democratic vote. (And we don't mean to insult our Republican friends, either!) From this here issue, the letter that gets the most votes in each issue will be announced; the winning letter writer will have his choice of any illo in the issue his letter appeared. So start votin', range hands. There, everybody happy? wlh

NEW TO STF!

Dear Bill Hamling:

I am only fourteen years old and am quite new in reading stf. But the January issue of IMAGINATION was the best I have read yet.

I have been able to get only two other issues—I got to the stands too late three other times. The ones I've read have been good. I rate Madge as being in the best of the best.

The cover was excellent as was Introducing The Author and Fandora's Box. The articles were very interesting too. In fact the only thing wrong with the issues of Madge I have is the fact that there is no Bradbury in them!

SPECIAL DELIVERY was excellent writing from Kris Neville, YACHTING PARTY and RETURN ENGAGEMENT placed second. RUN, LITTLE MONSTER! and THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY ranked next.

I would like to have some fans between the ages of 12 and 20 begin corresponding with me.

And keep up the fine work.

Jimmy Mays
RFD 2, Box 300A
Toronto, Ohio

Ray Bradbury appeared in our April 1951 issue. His story has since been anthologized wlh

A NEW—OLD FRIEND

Dear Ed:

I'm probably the youngest reader to ever write you, but I thought I'd comment on your January issue. I'm only sixteen but I've been reading stf for 3 years.

In the January issue of Madge I pick SPECIAL DELIVERY for 1st place, THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY as number 2, and LETTER TO THE EDITOR as number 3. This has been the first issue of Madge for me, but already it's an old friend.

I agree with reader Russell about Bonestell covers, but don't with people like Sorenson. Tripe, my eye!

Do you know of any good fan clubs in Nebraska? If so I would like to hear from them.

Incidentally, I suffer tortures reading stf—I just can't get enough of it! My friends are beginning to wonder what this "stuff" is! (So far I haven't been able to make fans of them!)

But, here's hoping . . .

Jack Brownson
106 N. 5th
Beatrice, Neb.

They'll be fans the day they read their first issue of Madge, Jack. So get them on the ball! . . . wlh

TIME FOR CONGRATULATIONS!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Usually I buy my copy of Madge and hurry home to read it from cover to cover in one evening, and

then wait impatiently for the next issue. Now I feel it is time for me to add my congratulations to those of all the rest of Madge's fans. So here's to Madge!

I usually read the letter column first, and generally find all my ideas and criticisms already printed, so up to now I had very little to say.

However, the January issue was the best yet, with the possible exception of Sorenson's letter. (A fellow Californian yet, for shame!) I especially admired the way you put him in his proper place, among the non-discerning. My second reaction to such a letter would be to file it under wastebasket—after tearing it to bits.

Now a word about the stories. Every one of them had that "little something" that makes for good reading. I would rate them in the same order they appeared on the contents page.

I would also like to state that I am not in favor of serials. After all, Madge does not come out often enough to use them anyway. Which brings me to another point. Why not make Madge a monthly?

I would also like to state that I like FANDORA'S BOX very much, and your editorials. Could we have a few more cartoons?

I. S. Busch
Rt. 1, Box 123
Calistoga, Cal.

Madge will go monthly as soon as production difficulties are straightened out. This involves additional paper supplies, more press work, faster binding facilities, and on the dot shipping. We're working on these problems and as soon as they're solved Madge will be a monthly magazine—and that will be soon too! . . . wh

SLIPPING?

Dear Ed:

I have just finished reading the January issue of Madge. There were only two stories I cared for—SPECIAL DELIVERY (which in no way compares with CRY CHAOS!) and LETTER TO THE EDITOR. I didn't get the November issue, but if you continue to go down hill as you did from the September issue, well I don't know . . . When I read the September issue I thought you had something.

How about monthly publication? Also, how about another novel by Swain, Bloch, or Shaver?

Your covers are good—keep them that way. But please, no more stories like THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY or RUN, LITTLE MONSTER! If you improve, and get future issues as good as the September number last year you will be back in the top three along with "Astounding" and "Galaxy":

Keep the letter column long and interesting. Also, I like FANDORA'S BOX and the cartoons. And I'd like to hear from other teen-age fans.

John Morse
34 South Lake
Grayslake, Ill.

How did you like Dwight Swain's DARK DESTINY last issue, John? And we'll be presenting other novels by Swain as time goes on. And more cartoons too! As to the January issue, we think it was a great issue—but we promise that future issues will be even better! . . . wh

INFORMAL, THAT'S US!

Dear Bill Hamling:

This is my letter to an editor, and I want to say that I rate IMAGINATION the best of all science

fiction magazines I read. That includes "Astounding", "Galaxy", and "The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction". I like the informal way you run Madge. I like the large number of *good* stories you have each issue, and what I like best is the department, Letters From the Readers.

In the January issue LETTER TO THE EDITOR was my favorite story. Second was SPECIAL DELIVERY with THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY a close third. The rest were all fine yarns too. In YACHTING PARTY I thought that Fox B. Holden could have made it clearer that the planet they crashed on was Earth in prehistoric times. Or wasn't it? One more thing: NO serials!

David Hilton
17020 Pasatiempo
San Lorenzo, Cal.

The planet in YACHTING PARTY was not Earth, Dave. It was an alien world that had reached our level of technology ages before—and had destroyed itself. Remember how the ape-man crawled back into the twisted ruins of a city? And the illo was a symbolic scene to show that the ape had known rocket ships and atom bombs while we were still crawling around in the mud! . . . wh

EACH ISSUE GETS BETTER!

This is the first time I have ever written to any magazine, but I have read IMAGINATION for about a year now and each issue gets better than the preceding one. Some of the issues I might have attempted to rate the stories, but in January there can be only two ratings, first and second: I put SPECIAL DELIVERY and RUN, LITTLE MONSTER! first, and all the rest second. I think IMAGINATION is a wonderful magazine.

Clark Williams
324 N. Kansas
Marceline, Mo.

Thanks for the nice words, Clark. And write us again . . . wh

SOME CRUST, HE SAYS!

Dear Ed:

All I can say is, "My golly, some crust!" Here I sat enjoying the January issue of your great magazine. I was minding my own business, having read several good stories, and while looking over the letters to the editor it suddenly hit me! In your reply to Philip Brantingham who did not have enough dough to invest in original illos at conventions, you said, quote: ". . . tell you what. Look thru this issue and pick out which one you want. We'll send you the original." unquote.

My eyes bulged; my heart itched (if possible) for a chance like that. You editors just sit back on your little high stool and do whatever comes into your pretty little head. Did I say head? So you decided to satisfy the whim of some poor man, who, out of the thousands of us happened to tell you his little sob story. But I'll bet that if ten or twelve others had written you wouldn't have been so generous.

What I'd like to know is where the heck do you get off helping the guy when the rest of us are drooling for such a chance! Do you like the idea of having people hate you?

Now I know you guys won't print this. You don't want the readers to see they've been duped. Or maybe I've got you wrong—were you actually considering the idea of giving away five or ten illos to scads and scads of people? Until you do I'd suggest forgetting about helping brother Philip.

Even though I'm not so happy

about the foregoing incident I still like Madge very much. Your idea about giving the word count for each story is very helpful, and good. Your other features are all excellent, and the illos are peachy. * And in case I'm wrong, and you are giving them away—send me one!

Louis Wiedemann
412 Colfax Ave.
Clifton, N.J.

Boy, you sure have got us wrong! You know, that's what happens when you try to be a nice guy. So we give a helping hand to a fan, and you call us a louse for it! You want to know something about Philip Brantingham? Sure he wanted an illo just as bad as you say you do—and sure we offered him one. You know what, he wrote us and made us promise not to publish his letter and requested that we pick an illo from that issue and donate it to the coming convention—in his name, the proceeds of which, at the auction, are to go to the convention to help defray expenses. That makes us darn proud of Philip—and you should be ashamed for accusing him of passing a sob story.

But we know you really weren't mad, Louis—at least we hope so because it wouldn't be in good taste, and you will note that we've solved the problem of getting illos in our reply to Claude Ray Hall in this issue. So now every issue a fan will have his pick of an illo in Madge. You've got as good a chance as the next fan—if your letter is picked as the best one in the issue regardless of content, you get your choice. Fair enough? And once again, our hat's off to Philip Brantingham for a grand gesture. That's the mark of a true science fiction fan! . . . wlh.

SO LOUSY IT WAS TERRIFIC!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

First let me congratulate you for publishing a superior magazine of science fiction. I have been an avid stf fan for many years and feel confident in saying I can detect superior writing from inferior. I have only recently begun reading Madge, but I wouldn't miss a future issue for the world!

The best story in the January issue was THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY by John W. Jakes. To be really frank, I thought it was lousy when I first read it, but when I read it again, and then a third time—and after I read it the fourth time the real horror of it began to seep into my brain; as I put myself into Thompson's place and tried to feel as he did, then I felt like screaming myself!

For the other stories: SPECIAL DELIVERY, excellently written, gets 2nd place. 3rd place goes to ALIAS A WOO-WOO; it cheered me up.

If you have any extra space in your reader's corner slide this letter in. In the meantime I'll save my coke money for the next issue!

Jim Parker
203 Alexander
Univ. No. Caro.
Chapel Hill, N.C.

Re-reading a story is the acid test, Jim. If it still seems good the second time, then it's a nice yarn. You really gave Jakes a going over—and the story kept getting better. Why don't you read it for the fifth time—stop, we can hear you screaming now! wlh.

COLLECTOR TROUBLE

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I feel a great compulsion to write

this letter, for one reason mainly: to compliment Philip Brantingham on his magnificent letter. I'm quite sure there are thousands of fans who feel the same way about original illos. I myself have trouble keeping up with my collection. I've given up collecting mags in favor of pocket books since prices are so outrageous.

I do think you made one error in replying to Phil. I'm sure by now you must be receiving many more letters asking for illos. Am I right?

As for the January issue I won't classify any story, because I enjoy them all. But I must say that your magazine is picking itself up in the field. Your stories are way above average—as far as I'm concerned.

Al Rosen
4255 Maplewood Ave.
Montreal, Quebec
Canada

You'll note the illo situation is being taken care of, effective this issue, Al. As to Madge, the young lady is making quite a place for herself in sf society. Matter of fact she's the belle of the ball! . wlh

POSITIVE CRITICISM?

Dear Sir:

You want positive criticism; here it is. You are too conscious of your own existence. Your stories keep reminding people that they are reading a magazine, ("Letter To The Editor") thus breaking the hypnotic spell of escape, or that they are a special breed of homo sapien known as "sf fans". (I enjoy sf in a quiet way, I am not fanatic about it.)

So forget yourself and, yes, forget your readers. I realize that it is hard for an author to write convincingly about unfamiliar things, but

that is your burden. Also, please keep away from pure fantasy. It nauseates me.

Richard Green
1823 Island Home Ave.
Knoxville, Tenn.

Conscious of our own existence? Yes, we hope we are. Can you suggest a better state of awareness? As to reminding people they are reading a magazine, you picked one story out of a great many to prove the point. How about the rest of that issue? As to forgetting ourselves, we never try and push our views down a reader's throat—as you can see a reader of Madge can have his say too; we certainly will not forget about our readers—that's you, Dick, and in one way or another our job is to please you—and we will!

... wlh

FIRST—OF MANY TO COME!

Dear WLH:

I realize that this letter may reach you too late for the letter section, but I couldn't resist writing a few words of praise. The January 1952 issue of Madge was my first—but certainly not my last!

That cover! Perhaps I'm little prejudiced for flying saucers, but I've never seen a cover that tops that one!

And the story it illustrated, SPECIAL DELIVERY, was just as good! I've always liked stories that dealt with mental phenomena.

Matheson's LETTER TO THE EDITOR had one of the most clever twists I've read.

All of the other stories were ok too. THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY was just a little above the others, but only because of its ending.

FANDORA'S BOX and the letter department are outstanding among the features. Most of the others don't seem up to the rest of the mag-

azine.

The interior art is much above the stf average.

If Madge keeps on this way it will soon be on top of the pile.

Good luck!

Jim A. Schreiber
4118 W. 143rd St.
Cleveland 11, Ohio

Your letter got here just under the wire, Jim. Actually, we go to press two weeks after a previous issue hits the stands (date always announced in the current issue) but we try and hold the letter department until the last moment so that new readers, such as yourself, get a chance to say hello. We're glad you like Madge, but just advise you to keep your eye on coming issues—they'll be even better! wlh

BACK TO GTUTOOTSKIOLOWITCH!

Dear Bill Hamling:

You didn't exaggerate one iota when you made the statement that the January 1952 issue of Madge was the best issue so far. It was—very much so. The cover was done just right. A combination of the subtle "Astounding" type and the more vivid types. Bill Terry is destined to become GOOD! In fact, he is GOOD now!

SPECIAL DELIVERY was not a s-f masterpiece, but it—and others like it—will do until a masterpiece comes along. At least it's a change—having an alien as the hero. And, yet, another alien for the heroine. Slick switch with hero thwarting "mean" aliens after he sees the light.

I have always thought you had excellent humor, but Matheson's LETTER TO THE EDITOR . . . wow! That firmly establishes my faith in you to give the readers

something really different for their money.

THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY should have been published in "Weird Tales", but I'm glad you published it first. If it doesn't find a place in an anthology soon, well, the book publishers will have less sense than I credit them for. That yarn is a sure-fire hit.

RUN LITTLE MONSTER! was typical of Geier. In fact, it was better than his usual material. It kept me in suspense—and that's what I like in a story. Geier never lags, he keeps you guessing. Let us have more—MORE from the lanky genius of science fiction!

And now, with the January issue clutched tightly to my body, I shall bridge the gulf of space back to my native world of Gtutootskiolowitch.

B. G. Warner
P. O. Box 64
Bessmay, Texas

We're glad you liked Bill Terry's cover, and we're happy to say that Bill will present another terrific painting in a very early issue. Watch for it . . . As to suspense in stories, you hit the nail on the head. We like to be kept guessing too—and that's the type of story you'll always find in Madge wlh

HEY, MR. POSTMAN!

Dear WLH:

I have been reading Madge since the first issue in 1950 and intend to read it as long as you publish it. Now you might wonder with such an intention, why I don't subscribe and save money. I'll tell you.

When magazines arrive in the mail they are bent, the edges frayed, and that crease in the middle as the postman squeezes it into the mailbox is impossible to iron out. As a fan who keeps her magazines on a

shelf and screams with rage if a page is dog-eared or in any other way mutilated, you can understand why I prefer to get my copy of *Madge* at the newsstand and thus obtain a clean, neat copy.

This reasoning, I am sure, applies to many fastidious fans, and I'll wager that your subscribers are people who don't keep their magazines but throw them away.

Aside from this I'd like to say that Bill Terry's cover on the January issue will start a new policy in cover illustrations. I thought it was very clever and look forward to seeing more of the same. Your authors and artists bear credit to your magazine—they use *IMAGINATION*!

Edith Ogutsch
41-08 42nd St.

Long Island City 4, N.Y.

*What you say about receiving magazines in the mail may be true for other publications, but not Madge. The reason is simple: *IMAGINATION* is never mailed folded, always flat. *IMAGINATION* is always mailed in a heavy envelope especially made to fit the magazine perfectly. You cannot get creased edges, torn pages, or creases as a subscriber to Madge. Your editor is as fastidious a fan today as he was fifteen years ago—he knows that fans collect magazines and want them in good condition. So he lays down the law with the subscription department and sees to it that copies are protected when mailed. (Of course, if the postman crams it into a small mailbox—that's nobody's fault but the box owner. Fevvin's sake—get a larger box—and subscribe!) . . . wh*

AFTER 17 YEARS—A LETTER!

Dear Ed:

Even though I have been reading

science fiction for 17 years now, I have never written to an editor. Why, I'll never know, unless it can be explained as a slight shyness on my part. I have read many good novels of interplanetary, interstellar, and intergalactic warfare and intrigue and enjoyed them all, no matter how far-fetched. Your magazine, *IMAGINATION* has a better grade and variety than most others I have read. The latest issue, January, has a very good selection and I enjoyed every story, with one exception. I guess you must have used it as a filler, but *THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY* was not of the type I would expect to find along with the other fine stories in the issue.

Something else that hit me as soon as I saw the cover on the newsstand was the flying saucers in the background. I wonder if Kris Neville saw the film, "When the Earth Stood Still"? The cover saucer and the movie saucer were quite similar.

SPECIAL DELIVERY, ALIAS A WOO-WOO, and *RUN, LITTLE MONSTER!* were very good and I hope more like them will be forthcoming.

All in all, I enjoyed the first issue of *Madge* I've purchased—and will continue to buy it.

Best wishes for continued success.

Paul Aleridge, AL3
329-21-71USN
VX-5 NAS
Moffett Field, Cal.

The Bill Terry cover was painted long before the movie was released Paul. The similarity is a happy coincidence—both the film and the cover (and cover story) were top-notch productions! . . . wh

A FAN IS BORN

Dear Ed:

About three weeks ago I was at

school with a little free time on my hands. A friend of mine suggested I use it reading a science fiction magazine. I told him that they weren't any good, that they were all the same old thing, comic book material. Well, that started a big argument which ended with him bringing me a science fiction magazine the next day, telling me to read it.

The name of the magazine was IMAGINATION, and the featured story was BEWARE THE USURPERS!

All day long I wanted to do nothing but read that magazine—once I started it. After I finished the issue I went and bought more science fiction. I also started telling other friends about stf.

Out of "Startling Stories", "Fantastic Adventures", "Thrilling Wonder Stories", "Weird Tales", "Imagination", and "Galaxy", I pick (I'm sure everyone does) IMAGINATION as the best science fiction magazine of them all! That's final!

Robert Loving
809 Enid St.
Houston 9, Texas

Thanks for the kind words, Bob. And are your other friends science fiction fans now too? . . . wlh

WORD FROM OVERSEAS

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I really like the format of IMAGINATION. The magazine has a neat, streamlined appearance. The departments are great—they lend IMAGINATION the touch that distinguishes it from the rest of the field. Madge is really a "fan's" magazine.

It would be pointless for me to give individual story ratings for any issue because by the time I'd get them in they'd be outdated. In general, however, I like to see plenty

of short stories, the kind you have been presenting. I would also like to say that I appreciate a good story by an unknown writer just as well as a name writer.

Keep Madge coming!

Bob Shaw
70, Loopland Drive
Belfast
Northern Ireland

Thanks for dropping us a line, Bob, and let's hear from you again . . . wlh

FIRST OF THE BIG THREE . . .

Dear Mr. Hamling:

The cover by Bill Terry on the January issue clinched my sending in a subscription. It was by far the best cover yet. More like it!

I must say, the horror in THE MOST HORRIBLE STORY certainly escaped me. However, the mental battles in SPECIAL DELIVERY were very effective. After reading the story I was shaken by the strength of it.

I have been reading s-f for a year now, but this is my first letter to any s-f magazine. IMAGINATION, GALAXY, and ASTOUNDING I rank as the big three in stf. (How about getting more Bradbury—and where's TOFFEE!)

OTHER WORLDS does not rank near Madge in quality — for one thing too much Shaver, and also, your format is more attractive.

Keep up the good work.

David Van Arnam
1740-34th Ave., N.,
St. Petersburg 4, Fla.

We've always thought OW was—and is—an entertaining magazine. Of course, we're partial to Madge, because we feel it's second to none in the entertainment field—and that's our business! As for "Toffee", you will have your great new Myers novel in the next issue . . . wlh

The Next 12 Issues Are **FREE!**

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Mail Your Remittance To

IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois

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THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY it some time. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a positive demonstration that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—get across to him or her your ideas? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be intentionally, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of

the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

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The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. They will show you how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. Send for a copy of the fascinating sealed free book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs. Address your request to: Scribe: E.V.T.

The Rosicrucians
(AMORC)
SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY



Another scan
by
cape1736

